Essays

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Essays

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Summary

A collection of detailed essays on a variety of topics.

Chapter 1: Systems vs. Individuals in Dark Magical Girl Stories

Who is the primary antagonist of Puella Magi Madoka Magica? The obvious answer is Kyubey, who deceives the protagonists into signing the Faustian contract. Homura's goal is to stop Madoka from becoming a magical girl, which sometimes causes her to fight Kyubey both directly and indirectly. Yet choosing Kyubey as the answer relies on two flawed assumptions:

1. Homura is primarily struggling against Kyubey.

2. Homura is the protagonist of Puella Magi Madoka Magica.

The first assumption is incorrect because, while Homura does on occasion oppose Kyubey, she is far more concerned with removing situations that would prompt Madoka to sign the contract. As such, her conflicts with Mami, Sayaka, and Walpurgisnacht equal or even take precedence over her conflict with Kyubey. Kyubey is impossible to defeat, something Homura recognizes. When she kills one of Kyubey's innumerable bodies, she does so solely to delay.

In the back half of PMMM, Homura enlists Kyoko to help her fight Walpurgisnacht. She stockpiles military-grade weapons and sets traps. She prepares a detailed plan of attack that is almost ridiculous in its specificity. All for the purpose of defeating Walpurgisnacht.

Despite her best schemes, Homura never even gets close to defeating Walpurgisnacht on her own. By the end of Episode 11, after Homura has unleashed enough weaponry to arm a small African nation, Walpurgisnacht laughs it off like Homura hasn't even scratched her. Before Madoka steps in and makes her wish, Homura begins to recognize that defeating Walpurgisnacht is an impossibility.

Why does Homura put this much effort into trying to defeat Walpurgisnacht and not Kyubey?

On the surface, Kyubey is seemingly unkillable. If one body is destroyed, another takes its place. Yet the fact that Kyubey grouses about the destruction of a body being "wasteful" implies he has a finite amount of them. Being charitable to Homura, we can assume that in one or several of her previous timelines she attempted to destroy every Kyubey body and failed. But in all of her previous timelines she has attempted to destroy Walpurgisnacht and failed, so why has she given up on Kyubey but not Walpurgisnacht?

This line of questioning possibly comes across as a plot hole nitpick, the kind common among YouTube video essayists. But my goal isn't to say that the story is stupid for having Homura fight Walpurgisnacht instead of Kyubey. Instead, I want to think about Homura's psychology, and about the differences between bad systems and bad individuals.

Homura's mindset is fixated totally on the individual. In particular, the individual Madoka Kaname. Her goal is, explicitly, unambiguously, to "save Madoka Kaname." The magical girl system disinterests her beyond its corrupting influence on Madoka. Homura never seems to regret becoming a magical girl herself. Even at the end of the story, when she is about to succumb to despair, she does not regret becoming a magical girl, only that she could not save Madoka. Madoka makes a miraculous wish that improves the magical girl system for everyone and Homura is upset because it means Madoka ceases to exist.

Homura cannot operate on the level of the system. It is simply not her concern. As such, she prioritizes the immediate, corporeal threat of Walpurgisnacht over the abstract, systemic threat of

Kyubey. Walpurgisnacht is a "thing" that can be fought and, assumedly, killed. Kyubey appears to be a "thing," but is actually an extension of the magical girl system itself and cannot be killed, at least not with a gun.

The problem is that Homura does not realize that Walpurgisnacht is, like Kyubey, also a non-individual. The name "Walpurgisnacht" refers to a gathering of witches and demons. In Goethe's Faust, a story to which PMMM makes frequent explicit reference, Walpurgisnacht features as a Pandaemonium of sorts where innumerable ghoulish figures interact with the protagonist. Writer Gen Urobuchi, in a 2011 interview, described Walpurgisnacht as such:

> It has the destructive power to bring about natural disasters powerful enough to blow away an entire town, but originally it was a single witch. It's a witch that has grown from the combination of countless other witches. Walpurgisnacht combines with other witches in the same way two powerful tornadoes are able to combine and become larger. It's essentially a "conglomeration"-type witch. Because it's so powerful, it rarely shows itself.

Much as Kyubey is an amalgam of bodies possessing a singular purpose, Walpurgisnacht is comprised of an amalgam of witches inflicting a singular destruction upon the world. Like Kyubey, the individuality is an illusion, and as such, the individual-focused Homura cannot defeat it by herself, not in any timeline.

That doesn't mean Walpurgisnacht is undefeatable. Indeed, Walpurgisnacht is shown defeated in a previous timeline; but defeated by Madoka and Homura working together, not by Homura alone. Even though at this point in the story Homura is a significantly weaker combatant, and even though Madoka is not shown to be anything more than an average magical girl herself, they somehow accomplished what a Homura possessed of perfect foresight, immaculately armed, and in peak physical condition could not. If read literally, it must be concluded that Madoka is capable of accomplishing something that Homura cannot, regardless of Homura's physical prowess and perfect (time travel-aided) intelligence.

What does Madoka possess that Homura does not?

Why is Madoka the protagonist of Puella Magi Madoka Magica, and not Homura?

The second question may at first seem strange. After all, Madoka serves as the primary point of view character for most of the show, while Homura comes off as aloof and even antagonistic until near the end. Over time, however, it becomes clear that Homura is the one driving the action of the story, while Madoka, although central to Homura's motivations, is often a useless tagalong. Simply being the point of view character doesn't immediately make one the protagonist, as Nick Carraway and Dr. Watson can attest. Madoka's role for most of the story is closer to the damsel in distress than the hero.

And yet, while Homura drives the action and fights Walpurgisnacht and has the goal most central to PMMM's storyline, she is utterly incapable of achieving her goal. She doesn't simply fail, she fails over and over and over again until the prospect of success begins to appear to her as an impossibility and she teeters on the precipice of despair. She fails despite being stronger and faster and more knowledgeable than previous incarnations of her that succeeded with Madoka's help.

Madoka steps into the final episode after an entire story of uselessness, does one thing, and fixes everything.

The reason is because Madoka correctly identifies the true antagonist of PMMM. Not Kyubey, not Walpurgisnacht. Not an individual, not a monster to fight, not something that can be shot and killed. The magical girl system itself. Her ability to identify this antagonist is what sets her apart from Homura. If Homura is individual-minded, Madoka is universal-minded. She abhors the suffering of all magical girls. She is kind and compassionate to everyone. This difference is what prompts Homura's one-sided obsession with Madoka to begin with. Homura interpreted Madoka's universal kindness toward everyone as an individual kindness toward Homura in particular. It's this difference that sets the stage for the events that transpire in Rebellion.

(It's important not to conflate this distinction between individual and universal with the distinction between selfish and selfless. Of the characters in PMMM, only Mami makes a truly selfish wish. Sayaka, Kyoko, and Homura make wishes that directly help someone other than themselves. Well, sort of—Homura doesn't wish for Madoka's safety, she wishes specifically for "the power to save Madoka," which indicates a kind of selfish hero complex. Likewise, it's implied that despite the ostensible selflessness of Sayaka and Kyoko's wishes, they made them for selfish reasons, so perhaps the statement is indeed that a selflessness focused on the individual is actually disguised selfishness.)

So, how do you fight a system? As Madoka states explicitly at the beginning of Episode 12, she would not have been able to make her wish if not for Homura's constant struggling. This statement is supported by the literal explanation Kyubey provides for Madoka's immense power, that being that Homura's innumerable repetitions of the timeline have maximized Madoka's "karmic potential." The show's literal answer is obviously fantastical. But the metaphorical implication seems to be that the suffering of individuals, once it reaches a certain magnitude, is capable of prompting universal change. This statement is not particularly controversial if looked at in a historical context; almost every improvement humankind has achieved, political or technological, occurred after humans suffered a long time without it. PMMM ends with a statement of hope: Keep hoping, and eventually your suffering will come to an end. You yourself may be powerless to change the world, but that doesn't make your misery meaningless.

Regardless of its truth, it's a platitudinous statement, akin to "Never give up!" I don't think it's valuable to take that final statement of hope as PMMM's ultimate theme or moral, despite its placement Aesop-like at the show's conclusion. It's a theme one might find in any more traditional magical girl show or even any children's show in general, and it's divorced from the show's many emotional and narrative complexities. What is more valuable is how the show arrives at that conclusion. After all, as I've heard detractors state, Madoka could have technically resolved the entire story as early as Episode 2 by making the same wish as she eventually did. Something, not external but internal, prevents Madoka from doing that until the end of the story.

If Madoka is taken as the protagonist of Puella Magi Madoka Magica, despite her role for most of it as a passive, helpless observer, then it's imperative to view the story not as a traditional struggle against a "thing" that can be destroyed (the way Homura views it) but as a struggle for understanding. Madoka requires a certain amount of knowledge, lacking at the show's onset, in order to make the wish she always could have made, the wish she failed to make in countless failed timelines. That knowledge is the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this essay: Who is the antagonist? Who must be defeated?

The answer, broadly, is not an individual, but the system.

I could go more into why she specifically targets the part of the system (the concept of witches) that she does, or why she doesn't eliminate the system entirely. But for now, I want to expand this discussion to another dark magical girl story, Magical Girl Raising Project.

Magical Girl Raising Project is a series of light novels, the first of which was published in 2012, one year after PMMM was released. As of the time of writing, the series has seven distinct arcs, with each arc being a mostly self-contained story (although some characters and plot elements appear in multiple arcs). The first arc was adapted into an anime in 2016. It follows sixteen people who, after a popular mobile game turns them into magical girls, are forced to fight to the death by the game's twisted administrators.

Many dark magical girl shows that came out in the wake of PMMM have been derided as imitators, but while it's possible that these shows would not have been greenlit if not for PMMM's success, narratively most of these shows are quite different outside of superficial similarities. MGRP, for instance, is much closer to Battle Royale or Hunger Games in plot progression than it is to PMMM. However, one way in which MGRP is similar to PMMM, beyond simply featuring magical girls in an unexpectedly violent situation, is the thematic emphasis on systemic change versus defeating bad individuals.

At the beginning of MGRP's first arc, the game's administrators, represented by the mascot character Fav, present themselves as legitimate officials of the "Magical Kingdom" where all magical power originates. The battle royale is justified to its participants as a natural and necessary component of the magical system—the specific excuse being that having too many magical girls drains too much mana, so the number of magical girls must be cut to save energy. Like PMMM, the cruelties that the characters experience are excused as necessary for the benefit of the system. As such, while many of the battle royale's participants are displeased by the situation, few attempt to fight against the system itself and most focus on the immediate threat of their fellow participants.

Where MGRP diverges from PMMM is that this system is eventually revealed as a lie. Fav and his partner Cranberry are indeed representatives of the Magical Kingdom, but the mana problem is a complete fabrication and magical girls can be turned back into normal humans without killing them. In truth, the system is entirely benign, with its only stated goal being to create magical girls who can help humans, and there are no actual systemic drawbacks to being a magical girl. Fav and Cranberry have manufactured the battle royale for their own sociopathic purposes, and the Magical Kingdom is ignorant of their actions. In short, they're outlaws. Once they are both killed by the end of the first arc, the battle royale ends and the survivors live on.

Like PMMM, the initial difficulty the characters have in answering the question "who is the antagonist" prolongs a story that could have ended very early into a bloodbath. Had the battle royale participants known that their true enemies were Fav and Cranberry, they might have worked together to defeat them with relatively little issue. It is the seemingly hopeless systemic explanation for their woes that causes most of them to shut up and do what is expected of them.

Even though the situations are reversed, with a systemic threat concealed by individual threats in PMMM and an individual threat concealed by a systemic threat in MGRP, the psychology of the characters remains consistent between both works. If that was where MGRP ended, then on the whole it would be a fun play on post-PMMM audience expectations without betraying many of the fundamental concepts that underlie PMMM. But MGRP continues, and in its continuations develops a much larger amount of complexity and nuance (not necessarily to be confused with "quality") over this basic dichotomy of antagonistic individuals and antagonistic systems. As I mentioned previously, PMMM's ultimate moral is somewhat platitudinous: Never give up! Homura's individual-minded approach to problem-solving is depicted as fundamentally ineffectual, and her constant failures are only valuable insofar as they inspire Madoka to action. The narrative's focus is on the discovery of the true antagonist, and the actual resolution to the conflict is immediate and abrupt, nearly to deus ex machina levels.

This simplistic resolution is possibly a byproduct of several restraints that, in most other cases, allow for PMMM's phenomenal technical quality. By that I mean, PMMM is a highly simplified story. It has a limited cast of characters, a limited runtime, and a limited narrative arc that strips out almost anything unnecessary in favor of presenting a singular storyline. Its characters are stark, almost archetypal, with few character traits that do not directly feed into their role in the story. It lacks filler and its pacing is extremely even, with a significant plot development occurring every two to three episodes. From a technical standpoint, these are all massive advantages in telling a cohesive, well-designed story, and the popular reaction to PMMM has been overwhelmingly positive despite its niche subject matter and blunt brutality. Indeed, when most people compare PMMM to other dark magical girl stories, the thesis often boils down to "Here is why PMMM is good and this story, with fundamentally similar subject matter, is bad."

But while the limited narrative elements allow for consistent technical excellence, they also limit the narrative's ability to tackle complex subject matter, such as the reformation of necessary but cruel systems for the betterment of all individuals. How do you fight a system? PMMM doesn't have narrative space to delve into that question the way it can its fundamental question of "How do you recognize the true antagonist?" Homura suffers, Madoka learns from her suffering, and then Madoka makes a wish and everything gets better. Never give up! That isn't to denigrate PMMM, which I consider to be the best anime that I've seen. It's simply recognizing that PMMM does not and cannot do everything. Its resolution isn't even bad, per se; on the contrary, it is incredibly cathartic and satisfying. What is important about Madoka's wish is that she recognizes what must be done, not the way that she achieves it. That is why I describe PMMM as a story about Madoka gaining knowledge, not a story about Homura fighting to save Madoka.

MGRP, by contrast, is not a masterpiece on a technical level. Over seven arcs it accumulates a cast of over one hundred named characters, many of whom are completely pointless and die without purpose. Its storylines promulgate and do not always add to the overarching whole. It can lurch between a breakneck pace and long periods where little happens. But this technical sloppiness allows for a much broader, more complex storyline, and through this complexity MGRP is able to accomplish things that PMMM cannot.

As MGRP continues past its initial, death-game-style arcs, it develops into an overarching narrative about an ineffectual, bureaucratic government and various attempts to improve it. The Magical Kingdom, while benign in its stated goals, is nonetheless painted as incompetent at best and corrupted by petty infighting at worst, which allows bad individuals such as Fav and Cranberry to take advantage of it and get away with various misdeeds. The question of "who is the antagonist?" or "what should we be fighting?" becomes again muddied. Should the emphasis be on defeating all the bad individuals, or should it be on reforming the ineffectual system to remove the influence those individuals have? MGRP refrains from answering this question definitively one way or another, a restraint aided by its lack of a single central protagonist. While there are prominent characters who recur from arc to arc, none is present in every arc, and even in arcs where they do appear they are not always in a central role. As such, no one character's goals are aligned with the goals of the story itself.

The most obvious answer of the question "who is the protagonist of MGRP?" would be Snow White, one of the survivors of the first arc who also has the highest number of appearances of any character across the series. The notion of Snow White as protagonist is aided by her moral purity; her goal is consistently to help people and defeat villains, and although she is technically a vigilante insomuch as she operates outside the Magical Kingdom's official law enforcement system, she never wavers in her fundamental moral values when achieving her goals. Regardless of whether she is the protagonist, she is unquestionably a "hero."

However, Snow White is, like Homura, consistently limited in what she is actually able to achieve. The moment she becomes a magical girl, she is described as being incapable of larger-scale activities:

> That day marked Snow White's debut. Every night she'd sneak out her window to look for people to help: a middle schooler who'd lost her house key, a university student who'd had their car stolen, and a businessman under pressure for money, to name a few. There were also many troubles she couldn't do anything about, like concealing adultery, a boy unsure of whether or not to confess to the girl he had a crush on, or a retiree desperate for their pension.

Of the three troubles listed that Snow White can't help, the last, about the pension, sticks out to me. The pension, of course, is a problem that cannot be solved on the individual level, and would require some kind of systemic change. Snow White's limitations are delved into later by another magical girl, Ripple:

> Sightings of the white magical girl were leaps and bounds ahead of sightings of the others. She wasn't even doing anything spectacular. Her assistance came in small, everyday actions like picking up dropped change, ferrying forgotten lunches, and reminding people to zip up their flies. Was helping with mundane difficulties a magical girl's true purpose? Or was she simply not capable of undertaking greater issues? [...] It wasn't that Ripple didn't want to serve the community, but she was too embarrassed to say otherwise. However, maybe boldly declaring "I want to help others!" and actually doing so was the correct way to be a magical girl, she mused.

This quote is one of the first instances in MGRP of a character wondering what the "correct way to be a magical girl" is, and this question will eventually become core to the series as a whole, with competing ideological notions leading to much of the conflict. For many, Snow White is the "ideal magical girl," morally pure and always performing selfless deeds. Even when she turns from random acts of kindness to tracking down and arresting criminal magical girls, this sense of moral purity remains with her. Yet Snow White is fundamentally incapable of fostering lasting change.

The biggest example of this inability comes in the fourth arc, in which Snow White squares off against a high-ranking but corrupt Magical Kingdom official named Grim Heart, who is attempting to cover up and profit off of illegal experimentation to create stronger magical girls. Grim Heart is not only the leader of one of the Magical Kingdom's three factions (basically, political parties), but she is also a quasi-theocratic figure said to be an incarnation of an ancient deity. Because Grim Heart is an individual, Snow White is capable of fighting and ultimately defeating her. Her criminal actions are exposed and brought to an end. Yet the removal of Grim Heart does not fundamentally improve the government as a whole in any meaningful way. Grim Heart is scapegoated by her faction and epsteined while under arrest. The faction continues its shady activities under new leadership and harangues Snow White and others as early as the very next arc.

Never, not once, does Snow White accomplish any lasting change in the Magical Kingdom. She dispatches individual villains, but that does not resolve the core problems that face her world. She is positioned in contrast to magical girls whose goals are, explicitly, to reform the Magical Kingdom itself. These characters lack Snow White's moral purity, and even the most heroic of them are willing to murder innocent people under an "ends justify the means" philosophy. Again, MGRP inverts what was established in PMMM; rather than the morally pure character being the one who attempts to correct the system and the morally ambiguous character being the one consumed by individual conflicts, the situation is flipped. Snow White is pure but ineffectual; other characters are ambiguous but capable of practical change.

Madoka's preternatural goodness eventually leads to her fantastic ability to fix almost everything. Her goodness redeems Homura as an individual, which causes Homura to struggle endlessly for her sake, which provides Madoka both the power and the understanding to fix the system at a universal scale. Boiled down, PMMM is a classic story of "good triumphs over evil," with the primary difference being that "evil" has transformed from a cackling villain to a complex, unknowable system. For a modern audience, living in an increasingly complicated world where difficulties stem less from the strong subjugating the meek and more from, say, tax brackets, it's easy to see why this modification of a classic theme was so powerful and why PMMM fundamentally works as a piece of fiction.

But MGRP seems to make a counterstatement: Moral purity is unquestionably good, but it cannot alone change a system. I could probably go on for another few thousand words detailing the various characters in MGRP who attempt to fix the system and what their position in the story adds to this theme, but to do so might be better suited to a second post more specifically focused on MGRP.

What I wanted to illustrate in this essay, and which I have probably done far too longwindedly, is that these shows possess a core focus on fighting systems over fighting individuals. Probably the most frequent criticism levied at these shows is that they are exploitative, that they revel in the suffering of innocent young girls. The second most frequent criticism, levied specifically at dark magical girl shows that came after PMMM, is that they are mere imitators of PMMM. I think neither criticism is valid. PMMM and MGRP take the traditional, morally pure concept of "magical girl" and counterbalance it against corrupt systems to make statements on the value of moral purity and the possibilities for systemic change. These themes are not incidental to the type of story but rather molded to it. They are themes that could not be easily explored in either traditional magical girl storylines or even traditional storylines in general, where the focus is primarily on a single hero fighting a single villain. On top of that, works that follow PMMM are not doomed to mimic it mindlessly, but can actually comment upon, challenge, or expand PMMM's themes.

Obviously, PMMM was not the first story to ever situate a system as its antagonist rather than an individual. But the vehicle of "dark magical girls" is particularly conducive to that type of story. After all, a "dark magical girl" story already undermines an understood set of practices and beliefs via the subversion of genre conventions. The thematic content is wedded to the semantic content.

Chapter 2: The Function of Character Death in Stories

There is a character in *Ousama Ranking* (2021) named Ouken. He was once a kindhearted knight, but after becoming immortal, he lost his humanity and now seeks only to kill without purpose. The text explicitly states that being immortal necessarily means one cannot have human emotions; that by being removed from the natural cycle of life, which includes having children and growing older, one cannot engender natural feelings of sympathy or love for others.

This theme of the relationship between death and humanity pervades *Ousama Ranking*. Immortal gods are depicted as cruel and capricious toward humans in comparison to the relatively benevolent human kings. If kings *are* cruel, it is in the pursuit of godlike power; King Bosse, for instance, steals his son's vitality to become strong enough to defeat a god. Meanwhile, Bosse's adopted daughter Miranjo plots to prolong Bosse's life indefinitely, a plot that involves the murder of Bosse's first wife, the sacrifice of Bosse's other son, and the destruction of the kingdom Bosse built. The implication is that in pursuing power and immortality, Miranjo and Bosse are losing their humanity, exactly like what happened to Ouken.

It's no coincidence that the primary victims of their plot are Bosse's family. After all, when one becomes immortal, one no longer needs to "prolong one's life" in the "natural" way—by having children. The mechanics of the magic used are arbitrary, but thematically it makes sense that sacrificing one's children leads to immortality. What differentiates them from Ouken is that the relationship between Miranjo and Bosse is one of father and daughter. This maintained link of filial empathy allows them to keep a shred of humanity and, ultimately, leads to their redemption. Bosse, seeing the determination and skill of the son whose strength he robbed, realizes he never truly wanted immortality and willingly ascends to heaven. Miranjo also relinquishes her ambitions and ends up married to Bosse's other son, the one she sacrificed, establishing a new familial link.

Ouken, by contrast, lacks any such salvation; for him to be saved, the text states, he must somehow become mortal again.

This theme of immortality, although not especially nuanced, is consistent across the story's explicit text and influences both the motivations of every major antagonist and the lore of *Ousama Ranking*'s world. The problem is that the story does not abide by its own morals. The problem is that every character in *Ousama Ranking* is already immortal.

Not literally, obviously. The protagonist Bojji and his friends, allies, and rivals could all theoretically die. But across its runtime *Ousama Ranking* makes it perfectly clear that none will die, that no character *can* die. Characters are stabbed, poisoned, hurled into bottomless pits, have their throats slashed, their arms cut off, their bodies mauled by lions. Not a single one of these wounds proves fatal. Always someone shows up in the nick of time to heal them. Sometimes villains even heal the people they had just mortally wounded. A climactic fight leaves ten (10!) named characters on the ground bleeding to death. Several have been impaled directly through the chest, one has been ripped open from the inside. All are healed, by Bosse himself no less, moments before Bosse challenges them to a fight to the death. It borders on absurdity. It lacks potency. It lacks consequence.

It lacks humanity. That claim sounds ironic, because a conclusion where everyone lives happily-ever-after seems like it could not possibly be more humane. But like Ouken, the story feels divorced from reality, divorced from human experience. Death has been eliminated from the equation of *Ousama Ranking*, and as such nothing that happens matters. It's surprisingly no surprise when Bojji (whose primary motivation is to become king instead of his brother) cedes his newly-won throne back to his brother after being king for all of five minutes. It took 23 episodes to accomplish, but there was no real weight to Bojji becoming king in the first place. So Bojji ceding the throne, a complete and shocking reversal of his entire character, is merely a mediocre shrug, an afterthought tacked onto the final minutes of the final episode. Why not? Bojji didn't even have to grow as a person to become king. He was always determined, always kindhearted. He just needed some technical skill to beat the villains in a fight. Nothing a few episodes of shounen training couldn't solve.

Ousama Ranking is clearly a show that passion and effort went into. The animation is often fantastic. The character designs are unique and inventive. And, as I mentioned before, there was real thought put into the themes. Yet the author seems hesitant to allow anything to truly happen. It's as though he or she has so lovingly constructed such a beautiful world that they cannot bear to mar it or change even a single detail. *Ousama Ranking* remains in stasis, doomed like Ouken to live forever unchanging, and as such ends almost exactly where it begins. It's 23 episodes of wheel spinning.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is *Akame ga Kill!* (2017), at the conclusion of which four named characters are alive—total. Two are minor, a third claims she will die of her wounds within a few days. The main character is dead. The main character's love interest is dead. The villains are dead. Almost every character of consequence is dead. Thousands of unnamed civilians, soldiers, and revolutionaries are dead.

The easy angle to discuss is one of extremes. One might argue that extreme aversion to character death, like in *Ousama Ranking*, bleeds a story of its ability to interface with human emotions, drains it of its power; extreme inclination toward character death, like in *Akame ga Kill!*, renders it barbaric, brutal, or worse, desensitizing. This logic of extremes is why most of the most popular works of any particular medium—by which I mean Hollywood blockbusters, weekly battle shounen, or Hero's Journey fantasy novels—fall into a happy medium, willing to bloodlet a few bodies, old mentors or expendable side characters, preapproved targets to inject a little rush of catharsis into a story's veins without making it overbearingly dour.

Usually these characters die heroically, sacrificing their lives so the protagonists can succeed. That sacrifice is, in fact, what often draws out the catharsis, allows the audience to accept death. The death had meaning. It accomplished something. Death in this context ceases to be brutal, senseless. It's a way of humanizing the unfathomable.

Akame ga Kill! takes this idea of heroic sacrifice and, eschewing moderation, expands it to a macrocosmic scale. Like *Ousama Ranking*, *Akame ga Kill!* follows a political struggle for power in a fantasy kingdom. Unlike the former, where who actually becomes king at the end is completely irrelevant and the main character abdicates to the very person from whom he wrested power, the latter's struggle seems more black and white. *Akame ga Kill!*'s empire is corrupt from head to toe, and the protagonists are a group of assassins fighting to take it down. One by one they give their lives to the cause, each dying heroically, albeit savagely. At the end, the corrupt government is overthrown and a brighter tomorrow appears imminent, at the cost of nearly every character good or bad.

What *Akame ga Kill!* reminds me of most is a Jacobean tragedy, like *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. The plot involves a political power struggle, the death count is obscene, and the ending sees a few colorless bureaucrats picking up the pieces and restoring order after the complete uprooting of the ruling class. But there is a key difference. In *Hamlet*, Claudius is wicked but the carnage is a result of Hamlet's reluctance; in *King Lear*, Goneril and Regan are wicked but the carnage is a result of Lear's foolish foolhardiness.

In literary terms, the protagonist's flaw that leads to the tragic outcome is called hamartia, and it's present in the classic Greek tragedies, most of which also involve royal families axing each other for power. According to Aristotle, perhaps the first literary critic whose work survives, the purpose of hamartia in tragedy was moral. By showing a character flaw and its ultimate results, the audience is instructed what behavior to avoid. (Aristotle also posits that the catharsis caused by tragedy has a moral benefit, purging the audience of excess emotion and allowing them to function more moderately in their real lives.)

At first glance, *Akame ga Kill!* has no hamartia. Its protagonists, the assassin group Night Raid, are responding to widespread political corruption and injustice in a way necessary for a better future. They are not reluctant like Hamlet or foolish like Lear, not overly suspicious like Othello or prideful like any number of classic tragic figures. They are, however, killers. In the first few episodes, members of Night Raid describe themselves as "bad people," although that self-description seems inaccurate given they kill only people who have committed far worse sins. Yet this idea that the protagonists are "bad people" is one that resurfaces throughout the show, especially in its final episodes.

At one point, when the climactic battle approaches, Night Raid's members wonder what they will do after the government is overthrown. They realize that, in the better world they want to create, there will no longer be any use for killers like them, that killers would in fact be antithetical to society. This paradox of the revenger is often discussed in both revenge tragedies and real-world instances of violent revolt as "the violence that begets violence." In Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for instance, Clytemnestra murders her husband Agamemnon to avenge his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Their son Orestes then kills Clytemnestra to avenge the murder of his father, and Orestes is then hounded by the Furies to enact justice on him for murdering his mother. This cycle of vengeance is ended only by the intercession of the goddess Athena, who institutes a legal court system to settle disputes instead of the personal enaction of revenge. In the real world, this cycle of violence is typified by the revolutionary leader who overthrows a brutal despot only to become as brutal as the one he overthrew.

In *Akame ga Kill!*, this question of cycles of violence is brought to head in the final few episodes by the minor character Run. Run works for the government and is even a direct subordinate of the main antagonist, but for most of the story he is a colorless man with merely utilitarian dialogue and few distinguishing traits. In the final battle, however, he reveals that he sought to reform the government from the inside, working his way up the ranks as a bureaucrat so that he might accomplish his goals bloodlessly. Hearing this, Night Raid asks him to join their revolution. But Run spurns the offer and (accurately) accuses their violent methodology of causing a bloody battle that will kill thousands.

Run survives the battle. He is one of the two surviving minor characters I previously mentioned, and is given a high-ranking position in the new government. (It's worth noting that Wave, the other minor character who survives and becomes a government official, is also a good person who happened to work for the corrupt old government.) Run is the most Jacobean character in *Akame ga Kill!*, the reason the story feels so similar to *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. He's a colorless but competent bureaucrat who is left standing at the end when every more important character lies dead, the dull official who dutifully and blandly restores order on a stage dense with corpses. He represents stability, the status quo. Yet the story never even entertains that he could have successfully reformed the government from within without violence; the villainous Prime Minister and General Esdeath are depicted as fundamentally cruel people whose political and physical prowess ensures they could never be removed by merely legal measures. His tertiary position as a background character emphasizes his "reform from within" position as hopelessly inutile, and despite the critique, Night Raid's violent revolutionary actions are depicted as heroic and essential. So why does Run not only survive, but become a major government official, while almost every member of Night Raid dies?

It all ties back into *Akame ga Kill!*'s theme of cycles of violence. As Night Raid themselves posit, their violent actions are necessary to bring about a better world, but the moment that world is realized, they can no longer exist within it. Run, by contrast, is the morally upright legislator, the steadfast caretaker of the state, the bureaucrat whose methodology is fundamentally peaceful. He is necessary for the world Night Raid wants to create, even if Night Raid themselves are not. It is impossible for him to create that world via his methodology, and yet only he can maintain that world after it is created. It is thus essential that they die and Run lives. They would not have actually succeeded at their goal of creating a peaceful world if the opposite were the case.

The final moments of *Akame ga Kill!* are surprisingly quite similar to the final moments of *Ousama Ranking*. In the latter, Bojji leaves the kingdom where he had just been crowned king. In the former, Akame, the final surviving member of Night Raid, leaves the empire where she had just overthrown the corrupt government. Despite these similarities, Bojji's departure is a betrayal of his character, whereas Akame's is a culmination. A peaceful world is not one in which Akame can exist, so unlike her comrades who died in the making of it, she must simply disappear. A voiceover monologue mentions that the deceased members of Night Raid, despite their heroic sacrifices, were forgotten by history, and live on only in Akame's memory. They are not idolized as heroes in the world they shed their blood to create; to idolize assassin revolutionaries would be against that world's principles.

Ousama Ranking is a story where nobody can die, and yet it is perhaps most thematically realized by the one character who does manage to die. King Bosse willingly abandons his pursuit of immortality and ascends to heaven, reaffirming his humanity. *Akame ga Kill!*, by contrast, is most thematically realized by its few characters who survive. (Another note: The manga of *Akame ga Kill!* has a much different ending than the anime. In the manga, not only does Run die, but two members of Night Raid, the main character and his love interest, survive and have a child. I haven't read the manga, so I can't comment beyond that.) Yet *Ousama Ranking* fumbles its message elsewhere, in the functional immortality of the entire rest of its cast, which leads to many characters who once had forward momentum in their storylines devolving into no more than a smiling face in the crowd, someone to applaud the triumphant protagonist (even though his triumph means nothing and is willingly undone minutes later). The character deaths in *Akame ga Kill!* are not simply aligned with its message but the foundation on which the message stands; the story has "Kill" in the title for a reason.

I sometimes see people who claim to hate character death in stories, who posit that the real world is cruel enough and that they seek only light, fluffy escapism in their media. Obviously personal tastes will differ. But I wouldn't really consider either *Ousama Ranking* or *Akame ga Kill!* high art. At their core they are pulpy shounen-style stories where most of the excitement comes from action scenes with magic powers. I think both slot into the category of "light entertainment." Neither are difficult watches, neither are challenging in a technical or thematic way. But one tells an effective story that is internally consistent and consequential, while the other does not.

There is a character in *Akame ga Kill!* named Kurome. She was once an innocent girl, Akame's younger sister, until the corrupt government conscripted her as an assassin and Akame left her to join Night Raid, at which point she became sadistic and cruel. Her power is that anyone she kills she can revive, like a necromancer, as a soulless puppet to fight for her. It's later revealed that this power is a coping method for her inability to accept death and abandonment. She will kill even her allies so that they can stay by her side forever and she wants to kill Akame for the same reason. When ten or more characters in *Ousama Ranking* are impaled through the chest and left lifeless on the ground, and then magically revived so that they might stand smiling in the background of the final scene, no longer anything but puppets for the main character's adoration, I must wonder if there is a similar impetus behind the reluctance to let those characters simply die.

Chapter 3: Evolving to Go Back into the Ocean: On the Fantasy Genre

In a week or two I plan to begin writing an epic fantasy story that I'll release serially, probably starting in August. The path to developing the idea for this story was long and unusual, so I thought I would talk about it a bit, as well as my thoughts on the fantasy genre as a whole. Fantasy is not a genre I am an especial fan of. I have read, watched, and played fantasy media in various forms, but I wouldn't consider myself particularly enamored with fantasy in particular. As such, my perspective is probably quite different than people who have totally immersed themselves in fantasy as a concept.

Over a decade ago, I had an idea for a fantasy story where the characters would come to learn that they were characters in a fantasy story. The author of this story, Ian West, was desperately trying to write the final installment of a successful trilogy, under pressure from his publisher and his agent Maximillion, but the characters would grow resentful of their roles and start to act "off script." The concept was similar to the film Stranger Than Fiction (a film I resented because I only learned about its existence after I came up with this idea). The desperate author would try to guide the story to its intended conclusion despite the unruliness and outright rebellion of its principal actors.

Enamored with metafiction at the time, I came up with an onslaught of ideas for how Ian West and his characters would interact. I had big, bold plans: an unintended incident would leave most of the main characters dead or missing halfway into the story, and the author would frantically attempt to cobble together a cohesive plot by ascending what had until then been minor background characters into leading roles. I thoroughly developed this idea and even attempted to write it five or six times.

The problem was I could never get far. For me, that was unusual; I'm usually good at finishing stories that I start, and this was a story that I was particularly excited to write. I wasn't even sure why I wasn't able to finish my drafts at the time. In retrospect, though, it's pretty obvious.

All of these subversive, metafictional ideas that I was so excited about necessitated that the actual story without those elements be as generic as possible—you can't subvert audience expectations without operating on a baseline level of audience familiarity with what you're subverting. And so in the early parts of the story—prior to all the big twists I had planned about the author, the ascended minor characters, and so on—I was trudging through a bog standard fantasy tale that I had absolutely no interest in writing. I would be both bored to death describing a big fantasy war with a hero and a dark lord and also unhappy with what I was writing because I felt it was dry and lifeless as a byproduct of my boredom.

As I started over again and again, I progressively attempted to limit the size and scope of those early parts. I pushed the author reveal forward and forward until I was basically writing half of a chapter of "typical fantasy" before pulling the rug. And yet skipping directly to what I actually wanted to write didn't make anything better, because now the big twists weren't twists. They were just the premise. There was no way to convey that the story was "going off the rails" from Ian West's perspective other than simply saying it. The minor characters who became major characters were just major characters from the beginning of the story.

So I never wrote the story. Years passed.

Writing Modern Cannibals I needed a fantasy author and an agent, so I repurposed Ian West and Maximillion to that end. MC wound up being more relevant to Ian West's story than just that, however. In earlier drafts of MC, I coincidentally encountered a similar issue to the one I had with Ian West, although in a completely different context. In these drafts, Z. was obsessed not with Faerie Endless, but with a game called Gryffonquest, which I depicted as an utterly generic JRPG similar to Dragon Quest. The problem was it was difficult for me to write about someone being so passionate about something so boilerplate. The elements of Z.'s fandom were constantly dry and banal, and I was never happy with how I depicted her in that context.

Around this time I saw a video called "How to Recognize a Terrible Anime (in just one episode)". The video was about the JSDF propaganda isekai, GATE. While the video's complaints about GATE's first episode were numerous, one of the first points was about the main character's otaku fandom for a generic, Dragon Quest-inspired JRPG. The video posited that by making the character so passionately a fan of something so boring, it made the character seem boring too.

I think I would actually delve a little deeper than that. It's not necessarily that it makes the character boring. People can relate to a character who is obsessed with a piece of fictional media, even if the particular media they're obsessed with isn't interesting. That's how relating to a character works, it's never a 1-to-1 "this is exactly me" type of situation. I think the main problem is that by putting almost no passion into the piece of media that the character themselves is passionate about, the author is in some way being dismissive or insincere in their depiction of the character. It's glib, even condescending in a way, evoking the concept of an otaku without being earnest about believing in it. Reflecting on my own Dragon Quest-obsessed otaku character, I found that was at least the case for my perspective on her. In those earlier drafts I wasn't just disengaged from Z.'s boring fandom, but I looked down on Z. herself. I was emotionally distanced from her, because she was passionate about something that I was desperately uninterested in. It made it a challenge to write her in an authentic way.

For the final draft of Modern Cannibals, I changed Gryffonquest to Faerie Endless, gave it a more unique aesthetic, and interjected offbeat oddball twists like "everyone goes to Hell" (thank you for the inspiration Final Fantasy II and Super Paper Mario) that made it seem like something for which someone really would have a niche but fervent passion. In fact, probably my favorite part of MC to write was the description of the game's plot. Making that change, I was able to more earnestly depict Z.'s obsession with the property, and thus more earnestly depict Z. herself, making her a significantly more effective character than previous drafts. (I would take this approach to the fictional properties in CxC, too.)

Modern Cannibals does not describe Ian West's stories in as much detail as Faerie Endless, but I did drop a few lines in there that painted his work as a gruesome, adult dark fantasy series that gave it a bit more dimension than a completely generic fantasy. With that buzzing around in my head, I revisited my earlier idea of a metafictional work featuring Ian West, this time with the (perhaps obvious to everyone except me) idea: "What if the fantasy world WASN'T generic?"

I started coming up with more unique ideas for the fantasy world. The main character went from a generic hero to a morally-ambiguous philanderer who began the story by being exiled from his community for cheating on his wife with the mayor's maid. Instead of a standard medieval European fantasy world, I developed a world modeled on colonial America, with muskets and hunter-trappers and Age of Reason philosophers and firebrand revivalist preachers. A world that was as of yet untamed by man, without grand castles or kingly lineages, where (taking cues from the transcendentalists) capital-N Nature was a wondrous and brutal thing and the true power over the realm.

It was a world I at least thought was cool. A world I was eager to write. Only I discovered a new problem instantly.

The subversive elements that were fundamental to the plot were now a betrayal rather than an exciting twist. If you actually LIKE a fantasy story, want to see where it goes, care about the main character, how are you supposed to respond to a big metafictional twist that causes the story to "go off the rails" and random background characters to replace the main cast?

My subversive metafictional twist was dependent upon the reader not caring too much about what came before the twist. But not caring about what came before the twist made me incapable of writing it with enough earnestness for the twist to work, either.

So why not eliminate the metafictional elements entirely? After all, that stuff's all been done in Stranger Than Fiction anyway. Just write a non-meta fantasy story with a cool world. But when I try to envision the story in that light, I start to wonder what the point is.

Fantasy is by far the most escapist genre of fiction. Science fiction is the only genre that comes close, but even then the genre is often overtly speculative in nature, depicting possible or theoretical avenues humanity might take in the coming decades or centuries. (There are some science fiction works, like Star Wars, that are in no way speculative, but these works are generally blends of science fiction and fantasy to begin with—science fantasy, as it's called.) Every other genre is generally grounded in the world we live in, and is meant to engage its readers via the portal of a familiar reality, even if a story is set in a fictional location featuring fictional people. Classical myth, for instance, which is in many ways the precursor to modern fantasy, is framed as historical record, the foundation of the culture that produced it, and even the romances of Arthur or Charlemagne follow this blueprint despite how blatantly anachronistic they often are.

But modern fantasy can take the reader to a world that doesn't exist, in a time that doesn't exist, where the rules of reality are not as they exist. (Urban fantasy excluded—which is why until now my fantasy writing has been urban fantasy in nature.) This freedom seemingly allows for endless storytelling potential, but also forces a problem to the forefront: How do you make it matter? How do you make the reader care? People respond better to stories to which they can relate in some way, but in a genre where you are encouraged to eliminate as many elements relatable to human experience as possible, how do you keep them engaged?

The early history of English-language fantasy stories (mainly late 1800s to early 1900s) skirted this issue either by being set in a "lost continent" somewhere on Earth or being basically isekai where a person from Earth travels to a fantasy world. That way, the story was experienced via a fundamentally relatable protagonist, and thus all non-relatable elements of the story were compartmentalized within that framework. As the genre started to develop into its own, however, and there became a cultural consciousness of "fantasy" that was in and of itself relatable to real people, these framing devices became increasingly superfluous. The Worm Ouroboros (1922), for instance, begins with a frame narrative in which someone from Earth travels to a fantasy world (set on Mercury); but both the frame narrative and the Earthling disappear from the story after the second chapter. By Lord of the Rings (1954), it had become commonplace enough for fantasy stories to simply be set in fantasy worlds, without any framing device at all. (Lord of the Rings was not the first English work to do this—that would be William Morris' The Well at the World's End in 1896—but it certainly popularized it.)

My point is that it took a certain culture-wide level of genre-savviness to develop fantasy as a genre to the point of Lord of the Rings, with a fully immersive fantasy world. This isn't even mentioning how the "seemingly endless possibilities" of the fantasy genre were in actuality highly limited to slight deviations from the mythical underpinnings of the culture. Almost all early fantasy in English drew upon one or more of the following: English fairy or folktales, Celtic myth, French chivalric romance cycles, or Norse myth. English culture, language, and ethnic identity itself being a weird potpourri of all of these backgrounds, these inspirations were generally familiar in the English cultural landscape even prior to the earliest modern fantasy works.

As such, authors were able to plunge readers into entirely fantastical worlds that were nonetheless relatable by drawing on relatable cultural myth. And as fantasy as a genre itself became more popular, the general level of cultural familiarity with the subject matter an author could expect their reader to have rose as well. You never have to explain to a reader what an elf is, especially not post-Tolkien; everyone knows what an elf is. And a dwarf. And a dragon. And now we've gotten to a point where fantasy is such a prominent genre that the baseline cultural comprehension of all this utterly fictional stuff has reached levels where it is starting to become an impediment to itself. A lot of elements of fantasy are no longer just familiar, but are taken for granted.

Consider a traditional, Tolkien-esque fantasy story. Although this story is set entirely within an immersive fantasy world with no overt tie to our real world, the main character is a humble provincial fellow, probably one who has never stepped foot outside their little village until the events of the plot kick in and they are forced onto a grand globetrotting adventure. (The first Wheel of Time book, published in 1990, starts this exact way, showing just what a long shadow Lord of the Rings cast over the genre.) This starting point is commonplace but maintains the "fish out of water" protagonist that an Alice in Wonderland-like isekai has, which is necessary for easing the reader into a world utterly unlike their own. Frodo has never seen an elf before, so when he sees one, his reaction is much more aligned with the reaction of the reader than had he simply shrugged and said, "Nothing special."

The problem is that as the fantasy genre has become increasingly ubiquitous and its readers have become increasingly savvy to its techniques, the reaction of the reader to seeing an elf or dwarf or dragon HAS become to shrug and say, "Nothing special." (Admittedly, this was true also for some of Tolkien's readers. One of his compatriots in his fantasy group The Inklings, upon the introduction of an elf character, shouted, "Not another fucking elf!") Tolkien and the forebears whose shoulders he stood upon are now "generic" despite their groundbreaking novelty in their own time, despite innovating an entirely new type of fiction completely divorced from the "real world." And the genre has adapted the way its audience has. Many fantasy stories now will go out of their way to indicate how different their elves/dwarves/dragons are from the Tolkien mold, while others eschew the fish-out-of-water protagonist outright and steep readers immediately into fantasy worlds where elves and the like are treated as nothing particularly special.

As part of a fantasy arms race whereby authors continually try to set themselves apart from the crowd, more and more unique fantasy elements have been injected into the genre, to the point where if you can think of it in even your wildest dreams, it's probably been done in a fantasy novel by now. To be more unique, these elements have strayed further and further from the Anglo-Saxon mythical heritage that underpinned the early English modern fantasy genre, either by introducing elements from other cultural heritages or by introducing complete neologisms. It was this logic that led to me modeling my proposed fantasy world on colonial America instead of medieval Europe.

I recently read Marlon James' fantasy novel Black Leopard Red Wolf (2019), which depicts a fantasy version of ancient Africa instead of ancient Europe. Although I'm not sure if I liked the novel on the whole, it was undoubtedly a creative and unique experience compared to my understanding of the genre. I have no doubt I could write my colonial America fantasy novel with a similar level of creativity and uniqueness and put forward a work that stands out among the genre as a whole. But then I look at the wuxia genre, or the onslaught of anime and manga set in a fantastical ancient Japan, which have themselves reached a level of genre saturation on par with medieval European fantasy thanks to the gigantic Chinese and Japanese pop cultural spheres. I think: Is this just another element of the fantasy arms race? Mining the whole of human culture until every cultural tradition has been done to death within the escapist non-real template of fantasy? And then what?

For a look at the "and then what," you can jaunt on back to the Western fantasy sphere and see what's successful now that the genre has become so saturated even people who aren't media poisoned are sick of it. Consider the recent explosive success and influence of George R. R. Martin's Game of Thrones, in which fantastical elements are downplayed in favor of a more "realistic" or "historical" setting. Game of Thrones is a cultural juggernaut thanks to the HBO adaptation, but even in the more niche world of fantasy literature, you can look to the popularity of Brandon Sanderson, who takes fantasy elements like magic and presents them in a more science fiction-like "speculative" way, with complex logical rules. Essentially, fantasy is now striving to get closer and closer to the "real world" it initially broke away from.

Western fantasy evolved to leave the ocean, and after being on land long enough to get tired of it, is evolving now to go back into the ocean.

It's conceivable that in a decade or so people will be sick of the Game of Thrones or Sandersonian style and suddenly you'll see a renaissance of Tolkien-esque high fantasy—evolving to go back on land. Rinse, repeat, rinse repeat. It reminds me of the fluctuations in epochs of Western literature; moving from the Age of Reason to Romanticism to Realism to Modernism to Postmodernism to Post-Postmodernism, a constant cycle between more "realistic" modes of writing and more "unrealistic" modes of writing, each mode arising out of boredom with whichever mode came before.

To write something that isn't just part of the current wave or a pigheaded reaction against it (because if you are simply trying to do the opposite of what everyone else is doing, you're as beholden to the zeitgeist as anyone else)—how do you do that? As I thought about it more, that was the core problem facing me whenever I set into my head to write a "fantasy" story at all. So I decided to stop trying to write a "fantasy" story and just try to write a story. That happens to have fantasy elements.

I'm far more confident in my plan now. Writing serially will lock me into my plan, so it'll be up to me to execute consistently on a week-by-week basis without the benefit of a pre-established world like my previous serial works, but what I've got here is exciting. I'm excited to write it, at least.

Anyway, those are my thoughts on the genre. I'd love to hear from someone who has a broader interest in fantasy, who perhaps is more directly familiar with its works and historical trends and specific examples that adhere to or reject the hypotheses I've come to. What’s the best way to write a unique story that isn’t either following the trends or pushing against them? And what is the purpose of fantasy as a genre that is striving to move closer to the "real world" that it initially broke away from? Is it that people are simply so enamored with the idea of "fantasy" as a genre that they will enjoy fantasy stories that are deliberately trying to be unfantastical, or is there some real merit to depicting more real-world themes and topics from the lens of a fictional world?

Chapter 4: The Making Of: Cleveland Quixotic

I. Context

After I finished *Chicago* in 2019, a powerful and persistent fatigue gripped me: the fabled "burnout." The next two years would be the least productive of my literate life. As one day ebbed into the next, I wondered if I would ever be able to write again. I thought of Andrew Hussie, who, after years of feverish activity on *Homestuck*, seemed now capable of only short spurts of creation, heavily assisted by amanuenses.

It wasn't an issue of knowing what to write. I had been developing the idea for *Cockatiel x Chameleon* since 2015. I knew its plot, characters, scenes, themes. But when I tried to manifest it into reality I felt drained. What I managed to scrawl was junk, far below my standards. Goaded by a lurking terror of infinite lassitude, I forced myself to blurt 60,000 words of an initial draft; loathing it, I scrapped it entirely.

That was when I got the idea to write a "fun" story.

My vision for *Cockatiel x Chameleon* was technically complex and emotionally demanding. Maybe something simpler, a straightforward adventure, would be a stepping stone to recovery. I thought back to *Fargo*, which I had written (unlike most of my works) with relative ease and minimal forethought. How could I emulate that experience? What made *Fargo* so easy compared to *Chicago* and *Cockatiel x Chameleon*?

After reflection, I concluded that *Fargo* was, at its core, a revenge story. Revenge stories are older than dinosaur dirt. They are fundamental to human experience, easily understood, all structure inherent in their premise. The hero, wronged, seeks revenge on the villain. From that sentence alone you understand the protagonist's motivation and the plot's direction: trending inexorably toward final confrontation. With such a powerful core, it'd been easy to add details and complications to *Fargo* as they popped into my head, without warping the story's innate trajectory.

If I wanted another "easy" writing experience, I decided, I needed a similar type of story. Something with a clear premise that removes the burden of planning. A "template plot," where beginning/middle/end is fundamentally present and the writer merely adds their own spin. It took little time to think of such a story type. After all, it had been ubiquitous in Japanese media for the past decade. Not only was it popular with readers, it was appealing to amateur authors; many of its biggest examples originated as web fiction.

I decided I would write an isekai.

II. The Isekai Genre

A person from the real world is transported to a fantasy world.

Not quite as old as the revenge story. Nonetheless, this narrative concept has existed for over 100 years. The premise immediately informs the challenges the protagonist will encounter. They will adapt to a world they know little about, introduce knowledge from modern Earth society, and rise in power and prominence. Toss in a Demon King hellbent on world domination and you get a clear narrative climax. The details can be changed nearly any way without issue.

(Or so I thought.)

In retrospect, I myself was being transported to a new world. If we ignore *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *The Pagemaster* or *Digimon Adventure* and focus solely on the contemporary isekai genre (say 2012 on), which is what I intended to emulate, my experience extended to only the following titles:

1. *Sword Art Online*

2. *Log Horizon*

3. *No Game No Life*

4. *The Saga of Tanya the Evil* (or *Youjo Senki*)

5. *KonoSuba*

This is not only a pitiful sample size, but a specifically poor representation of the genre. *Sword Art Online* and *Log Horizon* exist in their own subgenre—trapped in a video game—and have many oddities unseen in more traditional isekai. *No Game No Life* and *Tanya the Evil* are "real" isekais, but both have unique worlds that eschew most traditional fantasy elements (especially in *Tanya*'s case). And *KonoSuba* is a parody.

Nonetheless, I felt that, via cultural osmosis, I "understood" the isekai genre. Based on a few video essays I once watched that roasted dreck like *Trapped in Another World with a Smartphone*, and reverse engineering *KonoSuba*'s parody, I conceived an impression of isekai as wish fulfillment: A loser gets another chance at life, often with some boon to ensure they don't muck it up this time. They become the hero, triumph with their strength and modern intelligence, and meet lots of attractive women.

I smirked. Heh, I thought. What if I made an isekai... that wasn't wish fulfillment! Truly novel. Let us take the premise of *KonoSuba*—a benevolent god gives a loser a second chance in a fantasy world—and turn it on its head. Instead of a benevolent god, what if the main character was sent by... a devil? The loser protagonist makes a Faustian bargain to become a hero. They get exactly what they wish for, except they're still a loser at heart, and inevitably bungle everything due to their own social incompetence.

That was the flashpoint. Ideas came together quickly, exactly as I hoped. Soon I had a narrative. It went like this:

III. The Original Idea

Our protagonist is a bumbling failure who lives with his mother. One day he sees an advertisement for a devil's wish-granting service. Being a fan of isekai anime, he goes to the devil and wishes to be sent to another world, one where he'll be the most powerful person. The devil, a sleek and professional businesswoman, agrees to the unusual wish, but pushes the work of actually creating the world to an overstressed, chain-smoking intern. The intern cobbles the world together in a matter of hours and our protagonist embarks on his journey.

He arrives to find the human kingdom besieged by the Demon King's army. The humans are outnumbered; total defeat is imminent. Just as he wished, though, the protagonist possesses incredible power. He charges into the fray, destroys the demon army singlehandedly in instants, and slays the Demon King himself soon after. The protagonist enters the human kingdom hailed as a hero.

Soon, the Human King emerges from his castle to express his immense gratitude. He offers the hero anything, including his daughter's hand in marriage. The hero takes one look at the princess—named either Mayfair or Viviendre, I wasn't sure which—sees she is exceedingly beautiful, and eagerly agrees. He's gotten exactly what he always wanted!

Unbeknownst to him, the king is a schemer. Advised by two strange beings—the rotund fairy Tetzel and the living plant Tintoretto—the king believes the hero is too popular; the people would side with him if he sought the throne. The king offers his daughter not in goodwill but to tie the hero to his side. His ultimate goal is to control the hero's power to imperialistically expand his kingdom.

Meanwhile, the princess has her own schemes. She's a lesbian and has zero intention of sleeping with the hero. In a comic scene, she gives the hero excuse after excuse why they can't sleep in the same bed despite being married; the hero naively buys it. Eventually he catches on, but while he's upset by the situation, he's too morally upstanding to do anything but accept it. (This would be a recurring theme: The hero could use his strength to force people to do what he wanted, but constantly shirks from doing so because he refuses to act in a way unbecoming of a hero. His morality and desires exist in a constant state of push and pull.)

Eventually, the hero and his wife compete for the affections of various female characters, with the wife always winning. Temporary the elf was part of this subplot: A dimwitted ambassador to be competitively wooed. To keep the hero sated, his wife buys him a female slave to use "as he likes." The hero, possessed of modern anti-slavery sensibilities, is appalled. He instantly frees the slave girl and enters a crusade to abolish slavery in the kingdom. Unfortunately, because he is not particularly smart, when he debates the slaveowners over the evils of slavery they routinely trounce him (using many arguments real-world slaveowners once used). Again, he could use his incredible power to kill the slaveowners, but they're law-abiding members of society. Murdering them would be "immoral" in the hero's eyes despite his staunch belief in the immorality of their actions.

Around this time, the hero finally uses his power for something good and sends gold back home to his financially poor mother. Unfortunately, this charitable act also goes awry when his sister, an IRS agent, thinks his disappearance is a ploy to evade taxes. She gathers a posse: her coworker boyfriend, his two friends (I called them Aaron Van Zandt and Allen Van Langevelde, envisioning an *American Psycho* vibe), and a private detective. Using security camera footage they track the protagonist's last known movements to a dingy apartment building, where they find the overworked devil intern who created the world and force him to send them there too.

They roll out in a huge SUV: Five people plus the hapless intern, armed with guns and equipment. The king, not wishing to lose the hero, decides he must intercept them before the hero learns of their existence. In a big setpiece-style scene reminiscent of Children of Men, a horde of knights ambush the SUV on a forest road. Arrows fly through the front windshield, killing the boyfriend (passenger seat) with an arrow to the neck and wounding Aaron Van Zandt (driver). The SUV crashes into a tree and the sister flees on foot, followed by Allen Van Langevelde, who has barely spoken before then but who now reveals themselves to be a badass marksman as they dispatch knight after knight with efficient hunting rifle shots. The private detective is wounded in the leg and forced to remain behind, while the devil intern cowers in the backseat. Aaron Van Zandt limps out of the driver's seat and attempts to follow Van Langevelde, but a knight on horseback rushes past him and knocks him down a steep incline, where he smashes his head on a rock and seemingly dies.

The knights surround the vehicle. The private detective fights back, but is overwhelmed and killed. The devil intern is captured to be burned at the stake later. The sister and Van Langevelde escape on foot, but without the intern, they can't leave the world. They need to rescue him before he is executed. Meanwhile, Van Zandt, clinging to life, is discovered by fairies and brought to their court.

And then...

IV. The Problem

And then I got stuck.

First, it should be clear by now that I did not actually have a plot. I had a series of incidents, loosely organized. Vaguely I knew the main character would work to overcome his social ineptitude and ultimately truly succeed, accomplishing the character growth his get-rich-quick Faustian bargain could never provide. But nothing came together in a coherent structure. Despite my intention to stick to a template plot, I instantly destroyed the template by killing the Demon King in the first chapter. I still had character conflicts and ideas to pursue, but no actual story.

Plus, the main character being a loser made him—well, a loser. Even if he eventually grew, he still ate shit again and again before vanishing entirely from the big action setpiece.

So my original idea of quickly and easily constructing an isekai plot hit a roadblock. Luckily, it was now 2021. After two idle years my fatigue seeped slowly out of me. Finally I regained my energy; I no longer needed to write a "fun" story. I decided to shelve the isekai, potentially permanently, and worked on *Cockatiel x Chameleon* in earnest.

This time, the draft of *Cockatiel x Chameleon*—which would be the final draft—progressed acceptably. It consumed my entire focus and I might not have thought about the isekai at all if not for two hiccups. First, though I now had the mental willpower to technically execute my ideas, the emotionally intense material of *Cockatiel x Chameleon* still left me sometimes wistfully longing for a story not quite so bleak and harrowing. Second, I revisited the isekai genre.

V. The Isekai Genre, Part 2

The anime analysis YouTuber Trixie posted a video called Is Mushoku Tensei The Most Influential Isekai? (History of Isekai) that outlined the isekai genre's chronology in Japanese pop media. Watching the video, I discovered some surprising origins to the "contemporary" isekai genre. Though there were many isekai stories—even popular ones—before, the current isekai craze seemingly began in 2012 on a Japanese webfic site called syosetsu.com, where several popular isekai were written in close temporal proximity to one another.

The main titles of note were *Re:Zero* and *Mushoku Tensei*—followed by *KonoSuba*, which was specifically a parody of *Mushoku Tensei*, instead of (as I once believed) a general cultural conception of isekai. In fact, it was these three works that created the current cultural conception, establishing many now obligatory tropes.

So, I decided to watch *Re:Zero* and *Mushoku Tensei*.

I was shocked! As it turned out, my clever and subversive idea—treating the hero as the loser he was instead of as a wish fulfillment badass—had not only already been done, it was foundational to the genre! Both works feature loser protagonists whose social ineptitude constantly causes problems for them despite their cheat mode powers. Both protagonists are forced to develop as people rather than rely on their advantages, and the development of their relationships with the other characters is a crucial consideration of both works.

As it turned out, *Trapped in Another World with a Smartphone* (which I also haven't seen) wasn't the beginning and end of the genre. I had underestimated isekai. In retrospect, the languid existence of my 2019 and 2020 led to me ironically attempting the same cheap wish fulfillment of my imagined isekai protagonist. I wanted a "fun," "quick," "easy" story and intended to use isekai for that purpose, the same way an isekai protagonist assumes being sent to another world is an easy way to becoming a hero.

It was time to return to the planning stage. This time, I wouldn't take things for granted.

VI. The Original Idea, Part 2

First, I revisited my protagonist. Originally an afterthought: a punching bag who failed whenever he exhibited any agency. I decided on another direction. My hero wouldn't be a loser by incompetence, but by choice. He would be clever and intelligent, but unwilling to apply himself. He wanted a new world because the original didn't seem worth it; too rigid, too structured, too immune to change. His journey would be discovering it wasn't the world holding him back, but himself. Believing nothing could be changed, he stopped himself from changing. Thus, Jay Waringcrane came into existence.

Earlier ideas were remixed around this new protagonist. I merged the devil boss lady and the devil intern into a single character, a semi-hapless sort for Jay to outwit. That was Perfidia Bal Berith. The hero's sister, whose subplot originally lacked any connection to him, now became a foil to his ideology. She exhibited utter faith in the "real world"—its mechanisms, its processes—and applied herself diligently to maintenance of its status quo. That was Shannon Waringcrane.

Still needed a plot. Since my hero was no longer a social bumbler, I discarded the original beginning where he annihilates the Demon King's army and toyed with a new idea. The human kingdom, besieged by the Demon King's army, becomes aware via prophecy that a hero is about to appear in their world. The king sends a party led by the gallant prince to find the hero and bring him safely to the kingdom. When Jay arrives, he meets the prince and his crew, but they are immediately beset by demons, who kill most of the party and grievously wound the prince. Jay, the dying prince, and the sole other survivor—a taciturn, dark-skinned mage named Viviendre who is secretly the prince's lover—barely escape. The prince succumbs to his wounds shortly afterward, leading to an emotionally-charged moment in which Viviendre laments his death and blames Jay for causing it. Leading to an adversarial relationship between Jay and Viviendre that, after much character development, would eventually turn into romance.

Then Jay would lead the kingdom against the Demon King, constituting the main plot.

This idea improved on the previous in several ways: exciting start, high drama, and a long-term goal. However, as I became more engrossed in this project, I came to dislike the "default fantasy world" I'd used as my setting thus far. When my goal was "quick and easy," the *Dragon Quest*-inspired medieval fantasy tropes sufficed. Now, they struck me as banal. In particular, a generic "Demon King" villain disinterested me (which was why I summarily disposed of them in the idea's first iteration), so even if it outlined a clear direction, it wasn't a direction that enthralled. I realized that to continue, I needed to do some worldbuilding.

VII. Worldbuilding

I dislike worldbuilding.

I prefer the real world—or the real world distorted by urban fantasy and surrealism—to an entirely fictitious fantasy world. In writing an isekai, I had wanted to maintain the connection between the real world and fantasy world (hence why one of my earliest ideas was for Shannon and her cadre to follow Jay in a modern vehicle with modern weapons). But by relying on stock fantasy tropes, I only exacerbated the core issue. I decided to think deeply about my setting and design it to both stand out and clearly relate to our world.

To determine a deeper connection between fantasy and related, I pondered the historical development of the fantasy genre, from chivalric romance to Tolkien. Tracing this lineage, I considered writing a fantasy world modeled on Arthurian and Carolingian romance. Then I took the idea deeper. Much of the early modern fantasy genre, up to and even to an extent including Tolkien, was rooted in nostalgia for an imagined and idealized past. Many pre-Tolkien fantasy works were born out of Victorian fascination with medieval Europe, as evidenced by the Waverley novels by Sir Walter Scott, the Arthurian poems of Lord Tennyson, and the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The original isekai, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, parodied this idealized medievalism (Twain blaming Walter Scott specifically for the genteel Southern culture that propagated slavery and rendered the Civil War inevitable).

Then I realized that, 200 years before this nineteenth-century craze, there was another major literary work that parodied excessive love of chivalric romance: *Don Quixote*.

As soon as I made that connection, everything clicked. Rather than Perfidia whipping up a new fantasy world on demand, she would reuse one she created in the 1600s for a Don Quixote-esque figure. Rather than Spanish, my Don Quixote would be British, a royalist in the English Civil War seeking escapism in face of the collapse of monarchy. Pursuing standard chivalric romance activities, he would overthrow a corrupt Catholic church analog, slay a few dragons, and war against a Pagan nation that he later converted to Christianity.

What happened to this world 400 years after Don Quixote used it as his playground? I imagined the ex-Pagan nation a vassal to the Christian nation, while secretly plotting an uprising. Don Quixote's descendants, legitimate or illegitimate, grasping to maintain control in face of their weakening bloodline. Dragons hunted to extinction. A stasis that prevented sweeping change without the intercession of a true human, yet gripped by slow decay. Prayers cast for a new hero to save them from this stupor.

I also wondered how the Christians of this world reckoned with a Christianity whose foundational text is clearly meant for a different world entirely. While Don Quixote's scion, still ruler, promoted the religion uncritically to maintain their grip on the culture, underground grew a nihilist cult that believed nobody in their world was saved, that Christ died on Earth and thus only cleansed Earth's sins. All of this intermixed with the same historical devolutionary forces that ended feudalism and gave rise to mercantile oligarchy.

That was the world Jay Waringcrane entered. A world rife with thematic potential. Finally, a plot was forming.

VIII. Starting the Story

This last stretch of planning happened quickly. (Evidenced by traces of the earlier idea remaining in *Cockatiel x Chameleon*, specifically in the brief descriptions of the in-universe isekai from which Temporary the elf hails.) Rather than fight a Demon King, Jay's mission would be more chivalric in nature; he would rescue a princess from the evil wizard who led the heretical cult. Liking my earlier idea about the princess who first seemed like an ordinary damsel but turned out to ulterior motives, I decided for an end-of-arc twist where the princess secretly worked with the cult all along. Thus, Princess Mayfair came into existence. For the evil wizard, I reused one of the original king's advisors, the living plant.

The gallant prince and his secret lover from the second iteration returned as Jay's companions, although I changed the lover from a mage to a ranger. Shannon would still pursue Jay, but I merged Van Zandt and Van Langevelde into a single character named Wendell Noh and cut the private detective entirely, giving the sleuthing job to Shannon's boyfriend, Dalt Swaino. I rearranged the big action setpiece where Shannon's group meets disaster: Instead of fighting knights, they would fight a dragon, and this time, Jay would be involved.

After that, keeping with the chivalric romance aesthetic, I threw some faeries into the mix (I love faeries): the obnoxious Olliebollen, who would play off the more sullen Jay, and Flanz-le-Flore, a mid-arc complication. I also decided to make the cult members monstrous demi-humans with magic powers; the Christian anathema against magic must necessarily make it actively corrupting in this world run on Christian precepts.

On top of these plans, several long-term ideas already bubbled: The eventual introduction of the devil world, Sansaime's pregnancy, Viviendre, a battle with elves, Mayfair uniting the two worlds. The ideas flowed one after another now that I established a solid base. Sketchy outlines of the full story stood limned in the distance. I was ready to write.

I decided the work would be published serially at a one-chapter-per-week pace, identical to *Fargo* and *Chicago*. That decision was baked directly into my original desire to write a "fun" story. With a serial work, there is less burden of technical execution; the focus is on a fluid pace with regular updates instead of unimpeachable prose. Furthermore, serial writing lends itself to story speculation as readers comment every week, turning the work into a collaborative experience. Some readers of *Chicago* have told me that the reviews on fanfiction.net are an integral part of the experience, for instance.

When I post serial works, I first build up a "backlog." Essentially, that means I write several chapters ahead of what I'm posting online. The backlog ensures I can regularly post chapters even if one chapter takes longer to write than usual. (I can generally write a 6,000- to 7,000-word chapter in one week.) For this work, I decided to complete four chapters before posting the first. This generous backlog allowed me to post the entire first arc weekly, without a break prior to the climactic chapter that took two weeks to write.

When establishing the backlog, I also gave myself more time than usual to edit, which allowed me to polish the beginning for a better first impression. I meticulously pruned the first chapter to make the dialogue between Perfidia and Jay as snappy as possible while also minimizing exposition. (Originally, Perfidia explained the Seven Princes and their increased quotas in an internal monologue, since I knew they would become important much later in the story, but I cut it for streamlining purposes.) Additionally, I spent a long time deciding when Chapter 2 would end and

Chapter 3 would begin; originally, the scene at the beginning of Chapter 3 was at the end of Chapter 2, but I moved it because it better matched the tone and scope of the third chapter. Olliebollen was originally far more in-your-face obnoxious; I toned them down. Lastly, I added the part in Chapter 4 where Jay remembers being beat up by Shannon's past boyfriend, which not only hinted at a soon-to-be-introduced major character, but gave Jay a reasonable chip on his shoulder to cause friction between him and Makepeace.

With four chapters completed, I was ready to post. Almost. I still needed a title. The entire time I operated only thinking of the story as "my isekai story." Thinking long and hard, I came up with titles such as *American Isekai*, *The Waringcranes*, *144k Angels*, and—my personal favorite—*Hellbrowned*, the last of which I was strongly advised not to use by every single person I know.

(Side note: Setting the story in Cleveland had been an easy decision. It's such a funny city, taking Detroit's tragic Rust Belt decay and removing all grandeur. The Jon Bois video The Browns Live in Hell and the famous Hastily Made Cleveland Tourism Video sum it up neatly. Setting the story in 2017, the same year the Browns infamously went winless, was also a snap decision.)

Finally, I thought back to *Don Quixote*, the impetus for much of the worldbuilding, and the title revealed itself.

IX. Writing the Story

Because of my fast-paced schedule, I lacked the luxury to make major changes to my plans as I wrote. I started with a plan for the first arc and scattered ideas for the future. As I wrote the first arc, I planned the second, and as I wrote the second, I planned the third.

Room remained for tweaks, though. Each time I write a story, I try to do at least one thing outside my technical repertoire. This time, I wanted more flexibility in my characters. I usually only introduce the bare minimum necessary, and aggressively cut or merge characters to reduce the total number. In *Cockatiel x Chameleon*, however, some commentators criticized how the Consortium's limited number of characters gave the impression it was as dead and empty as Harper's real life. While that impression doesn't necessarily conflict with the story, it did expose limitations to my economical approach.

I dislike having limitations. (Unfortunately I have many.) Thus, I decided to write more characters whose storylines were not plotted from the onset, characters I would develop spontaneously as the story progressed.

An example is Lalum. I introduced Lalum in Chapter 5 as an enemy with a unique power for Jay to fight. Zero subsequent intent for her at the time. Then I realized her power would interact well with Flanz-le-Flore's, so I kept her around for that fight as well. When Lalum is attacked in the Flanz-le-Flore fight, I was 50/50 on whether she would live or die. However, a friend reading the story really liked her and wanted her to live, and I realized it might streamline the plot if someone was around to point Shannon and her crew in Jay's direction.

Having spared Lalum from death twice, and also conceptualizing more concretely the second arc—including Viviendre's role in it—I decided I had a use for Lalum after all. I conceived of Viviendre and Lalum being foils, envisioning their eventual confrontation in the last arc. Thus, Lalum went from monster-of-the-week to major character. To a lesser extent, characters like Theovora were introduced offhandedly, and while they did not become major characters, I found small uses for them later.

Speaking of Viviendre, that was another challenge for myself. With her, I wrote something I wouldn't normally: A romance. *Cockatiel x Chameleon*, believe it or not, was originally intended to be a straightforward romance, but I found myself incapable of writing one and pivoted to its current direction. Nestled within the sprawling undertaking of *Cleveland Quixotic*, the romance between Viviendre and Jay was my attempt to write two people who genuinely liked each other. Their three-chapter mini-arc in the middle of the story moves at a more lax pace than usual, but allowed me to develop a relationship I otherwise wouldn't have been able to.

In general, *Cleveland Quixotic* is larger than my other works. More characters, more plot threads, more locations, more everything. Though *Fargo* and *Chicago* are also large, they operate in a more enclosed and linear space. My thought process with *Cleveland Quixotic* was to open up and express that feeling of world-spanning storytelling the fantasy genre is so known for. It pushed my limits, but I accomplished that goal more than in any previous work.

The real challenge is, once you go big, how do you reel it back? So many of the isekai I mentioned remain ongoing, proceeding through arc after arc without end in sight. Today's most notable ongoing fantasy literature, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, is likewise mired in endless expansion the author seems incapable of curtailing. On RoyalRoad, it's easy to find million-word works with early reviews uniformly positive, but recent reviews expressing a new sentiment: "Dropped after nothing happened for the past 200 chapters."

Above all else, I wanted to avoid that trap. My solution resided in the second arc's climax, which I developed midway into writing the first arc. Uniting the two worlds made it natural for all the distinct groups of characters to join up for the finale, tying every plot thread together. As such, I cultivated multiple storylines in the long and less immediately plot-focused second arc, secure in my knowledge of how it all eventually connected.

Even so, at times it grew overwhelming herding so many characters. Many characters wound up less prominent than I initially intended, sacrificed for the good of the overall pacing. Fortunately, few characters wound up utterly vestigial, and those that did were minor. (There's no worse feeling than a character given loads of screentime and dialogue only for them to end up inconsequential when the curtains finally close. *Homestuck* reeks of it.)

A few miscellaneous changes that occurred while writing:

- I intended for Viviendre's brother, the "mad king" of California, to appear in the final arc, wielding ten relics for an epic duel with Jay. Given the large amount of characters already prominent in the story, I cut him.
- I intended for Sansaime to die at the end of the second arc and for Avery to live. This was mainly because I wanted Jay and Shannon to have a cathartic moment with Avery in the final arc (Avery still would have died afterward). I realized that, using Pandaemonium, I could have that cathartic moment anyway, and Avery wound up saving Sansaime's life both outside and inside the story.
- On the flip side, I originally intended for Mallory to die at the end of the second arc, but decided I wanted her and Mayfair to have a climactic conflict, which could only be done if Mallory were still alive.
- I intended to kill off the minor character Gonzago of Meretryce the entire story, probably by having him jump in front of Shannon to take some attack or another. I never found a way to work it in, and I feel like the actual use I got out of him in the climactic fight, though minor, was far more unique. I likewise considered killing Mademerry by having her take an attack for Mayfair, but I prefer her current ending. I did not intend to kill Pythette, but found at the last moment it would be more convenient if she died.

Beyond that, I wrote the story generally according to plan. Leaving aspects of my plans malleable meant I could write quickly without needing absolute certainty in the precision of every line and action. Only in Chapter 45, the climactic chapter with Beelzebub and Moloch, did I sit down and carefully outline what each character would do at each moment in the chapter. (The chapter's seven-minute time limit made such meticulousness essential.) Otherwise, even in other climactic fights, I relied only on general ideas about what should happen and when.

Ultimately, I successfully completed the longest story, with the largest number of characters, I'd ever written. It pushed my limits, but in a way that didn't leave me gasping for air. Instead, I feel ready and eager for my next story. What'll it be? I have an idea and I've already begun research. I hope to start writing it by the end of the year, and publish it by mid-2024. I'll let you know more as things become more concrete.

X. Names

Before I end this post, a few name origins.

- Perfidia Bal Berith: As mentioned in the story itself, "Bal Berith" (or Balberith, Baalberith, et cetera) is a false idol mentioned in the Bible. It is also a demon of the *Ars Goetia*. My familiarity with the name primarily comes from a weapon used in *Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn*.
- Olliebollen is based on oliebollen, a Dutch pastry.
- Mayfair is the name of a character in *Shining Force: The Sword of Hajya*, the first video game I ever played. Her middle name, Lyonesse, is a character from Arthurian legend.
- Makepeace came from an attempt to make a name that would pair well with Mayfair. My primary knowledge of the name comes from British author William Makepeace Thackeray. His middle name, Gaheris, is an Arthurian knight.
- John Coke's name was modeled on the character Wicks Cherrycoke in Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*. I only found out after I posted the first chapter that John Coke was the actual name of a person involved in the English Civil War notable enough for a Wikipedia page. I was more than happy to pretend this incredible serendipity was actually my plan all along.
- Sansaime's name was modeled on the characters Sansloi ("without law"), Sansfoi ("without faith"), and Sansjoi ("without joy") in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, which was the primary inspiration for the romance elements of Whitecrosse. "Without love" is also a notable phrase in the visual novel *Umineko When They Cry*.
- Whitecrosse's name also comes from *The Faerie Queene*, being modeled on the Redcrosse Knight, an allegorical representation of England (with its red cross flag).
- Many names in *Cleveland Quixotic* have an "allegorical" sense, being words that suggest a clear, often moral meaning. Charm, Charisma, Mayfair, Makepeace, Mademerry, Theovora ("god eater"), Condemnation, Obedience, Tricia (short for "patrician"), Meretryce ("meretricious"), Mordac ("mordacious"), Malleus ("malleable"), Astrophicus ("space plant"), Viviendre ("life ender"), Perfidia ("perfidy"), and so forth. These allegorical names are a play on *The Faerie Queene* being an allegory, although many of the names in *Cleveland Quixotic* are not an accurate representation of their character, indicating the breakdown of allegory and thus clear moral meaning.
- California is the name of a location in *Amadís de Gaula*, Don Quixote's favorite romance.
- Dalton Swaino is the real name of a semi-pro League of Legends player.
- Wendell Noh's surname comes from a professional League of Legends player. His given name is the name of a character in *Fire Emblem: Shadow Dragon and the Blade of Light*.
- Kedeshah is a Hebrew word that possibly refers to sacred or temple prostitutes.
- Ubiquitous is an ordinary word with a clear meaning, but its abbreviation, Ubik, is a Philip K. Dick novel that was also the name of one of the demons in *Berserk*.
- The Seven Princes, rather than refer to the traditional *Ars Goetia* representations of the Seven Deadly Sins, are pulled from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which was the primary inspiration for most devil theology.
- Flanz-le-Flore is a corruption of Blanchefleur, a name that appears in a few romance legends.
- Lalum is an alternate translation of Larum, a character in *Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade*.
- Pluxie is a feminization of a semi-pro League of Legends player's screen name.
- Tintzel is a corruption of the character's original name, mentioned earlier, which was taken from historical corrupt priest Johann Tetzel.
- Jreige is the surname of a semi-pro League of Legends player.
- Justin "Just" Vance is a play on J.D. Vance, an Ohio politician.

- Temporary, one of the earliest names that persisted into the final form of the story, is modeled on the elves in *No Game No Life*, who have names like "Think" and "Feel."

The other names in the story do not have any particular meaning or genesis.

XI. Conclusion

I believe that covers the generation of *Cleveland Quixotic* from beginning to end. If I missed anything, or if there's anything you want to know more about, please send me an ask and I'll be certain to answer. Thank you again for reading and stay tuned for my next work!

Chapter 5: Are ARGs the New Avant Garde?

There's this unfiction ARG on YouTube about a fake video game called Valle Verde. It is the most technically impressive thing I've seen on YouTube that was made by a single person, and if you watch its first episode for 54 seconds you'll start to see why.

ARGs, or alternate reality games, were a natural outgrowth of creepypasta (as the great Jenny Nicholson once put it, "campfire stories on a global scale"). With creepypasta, people, usually young people, would hop onto the internet and tell a spooky story about a haunted Sonic cartridge with realistic blood or a super evil serial killer who was never caught or Slenderman or something.

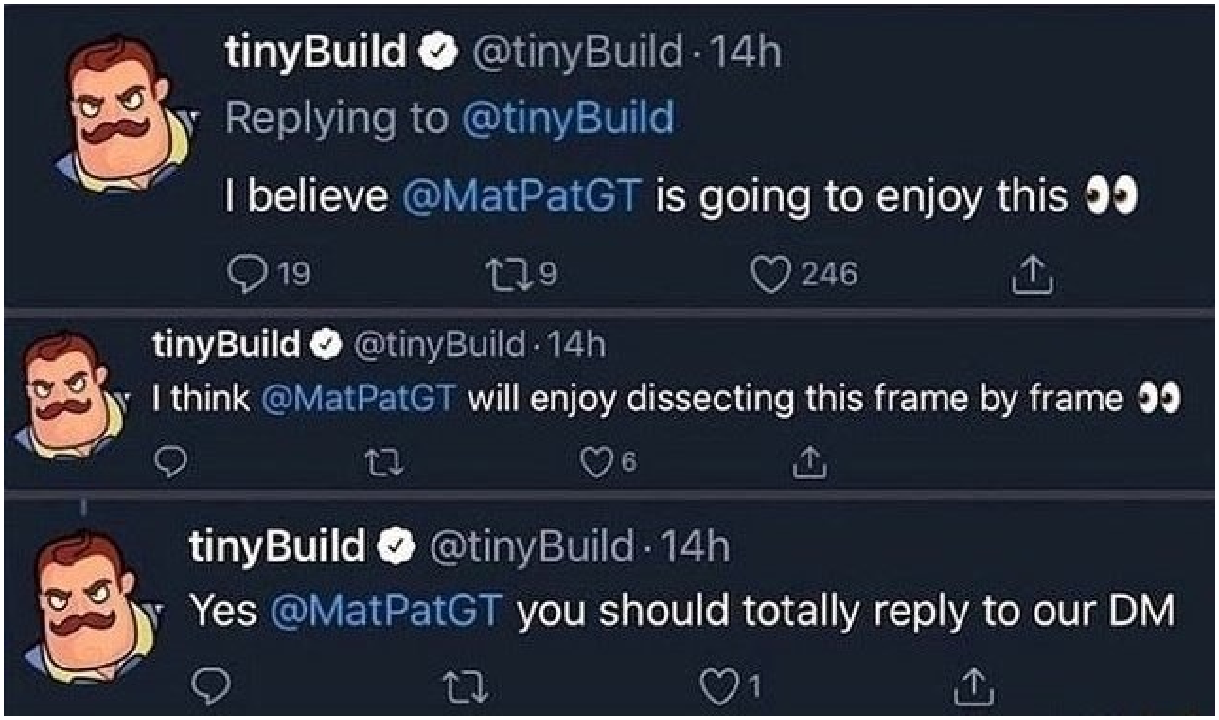
Due to the memetic nature of these stories, though, there became an arms race to make them on increasingly elaborate scales. Soon, people were ROMhacking their favorite old games to actually show the spooky haunted realistic blood. A famous example, Ben Drowned, showed modded/corrupted Majora's Mask footage that was generally effective because Majora's Mask is already sort of a creepy game.

Ben Drowned was also notable for being a story that was continually updated. Originally, most creepypasta would be a single story, usually short, posted once. This is an effective medium for horror, which loses effectiveness the more things get explained, but at the same time, when people like something, they want more.

Okay, so how do you make an ongoing horror series that doesn't outright explain everything, and thus retains its horror aspect? The answer, seemingly independently reached by a wide variety of indie horror creators at the same time (Ben Drowned, Marble Hornets, and the godfather Five Nights at Freddy's) was arcane hidden lore.

That's basically what separates an ARG from creepypasta: the "game" in "alternate reality game" is that sprinkled throughout a series of videos are scraps of hints toward a broader narrative, and the viewer is expected to locate those hints, piece them together, and figure out what's actually happening.

The logic is similar to the appeal of a mystery novel, so it's no wonder this took off. Channels like Game Theory posting lore breakdowns of FNAF or other popular series raked in beaucoup views. Indie horror devs would start putting dumbass lore hints in their goofball games to piggyback off FNAF's memetic success. Pathetic things like this happened:



tinyBuild @tinyBuild · 14h
Replying to @tinyBuild
I believe @MatPatGT is going to enjoy this 👀
19 9 246

tinyBuild @tinyBuild · 14h
I think @MatPatGT will enjoy dissecting this frame by frame 👀
6

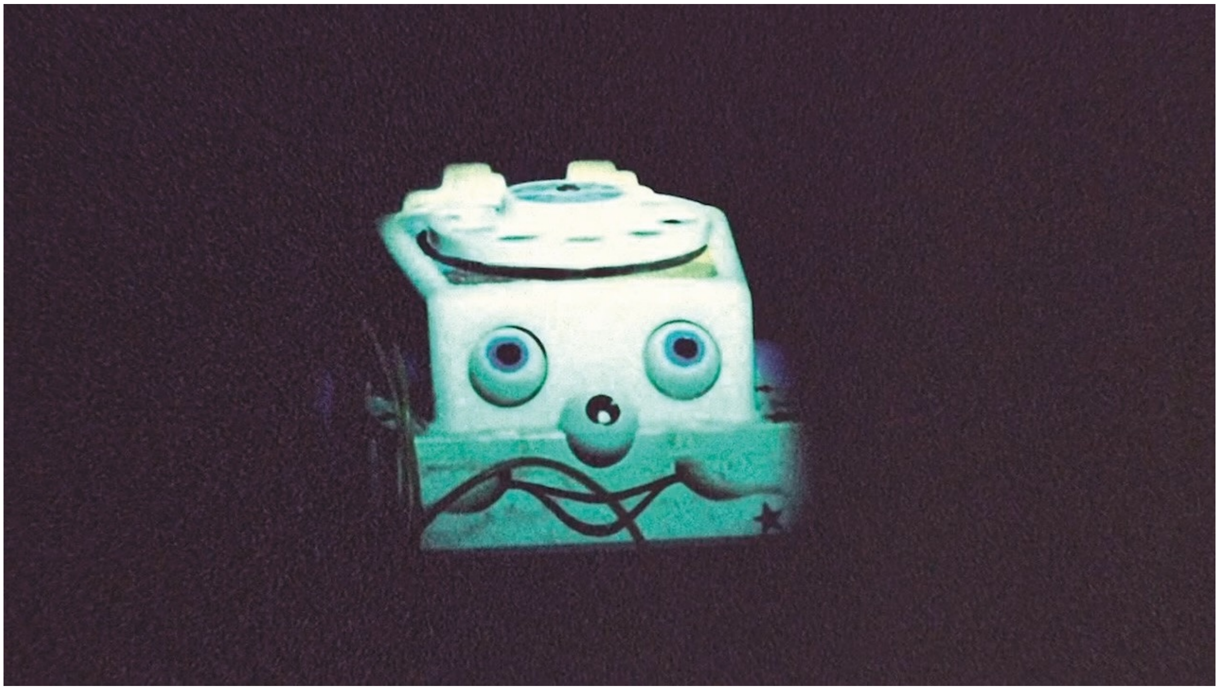
tinyBuild @tinyBuild · 14h
Yes @MatPatGT you should totally reply to our DM
1

But ARGs are fundamentally different from a mystery novel. In a mystery novel, the terms of the mystery are overtly made known. Someone has been murdered and a world famous detective has arrived to find out who did it/how they did it. By contrast, ARGs are often abstracted to the point that it is difficult to know whether there actually *is* a mystery. And besides, the mystery in an ARG isn't "who is the killer," it's "what is even the plot?"

Heavily abstracted, often fragmented storylines, with no clear plot, disjointed organization, and only scattered ambiguously meaningful moments that could be arranged in any number of ways to attempt coherence. What does this remind me of?

They reinvented postmodernism!

This realization came home when Skinamarink received a theatrical release in 2022. Skinamarink was an analog horror (another offshoot branch of creepypasta/ARGs) video blown up to cinema length, created by an analog horror YouTuber based on an original 20 minute video they made. Mainstream critics who saw this film, being completely unaware of what analog horror was, extolled the film for its Lynchian, Kubrickian influences. They were unaware its actual greatest influence was Mandela Catalogue. They were unaware that a thrillingly unique, abstract form of storytelling had organically been created by a group of outsider artists on the internet.



Kubrick would be proud.

I find this especially exciting in a mainstream pop cultural milieu that is trending toward, at least in my appraisal, increasing obviousness and simplicity in how it communicates ideas, which is not only boring but also annihilates the capacity for nuance, interpretation, and even meaning itself.

This also comes alongside ARG creators often pushing themselves to new technical extremes, extremes that are absurdly impressive for individuals. Kane Pixels has created amazing found footage videos using Blender-made labyrinths. The Mandela Catalogue guy was doing some crazy shit with puppets(?) last I checked. And, of course, the act of modding old games has evolved into the act of creating whole video games entirely as a vehicle for an ARG. The first example of this I know of is Petscop, and there have been others like Catastrophe Crow (which splices in an extremely accurate pastiche of a retro gaming video essayist, plus period-accurate game magazine articles), but Valle Verde takes it to a new level.

Since you've all seen Valle Verde by now, I won't waste time explaining the seriously impressive stuff it pulls off.

Instead, I'll let the other shoe drop.

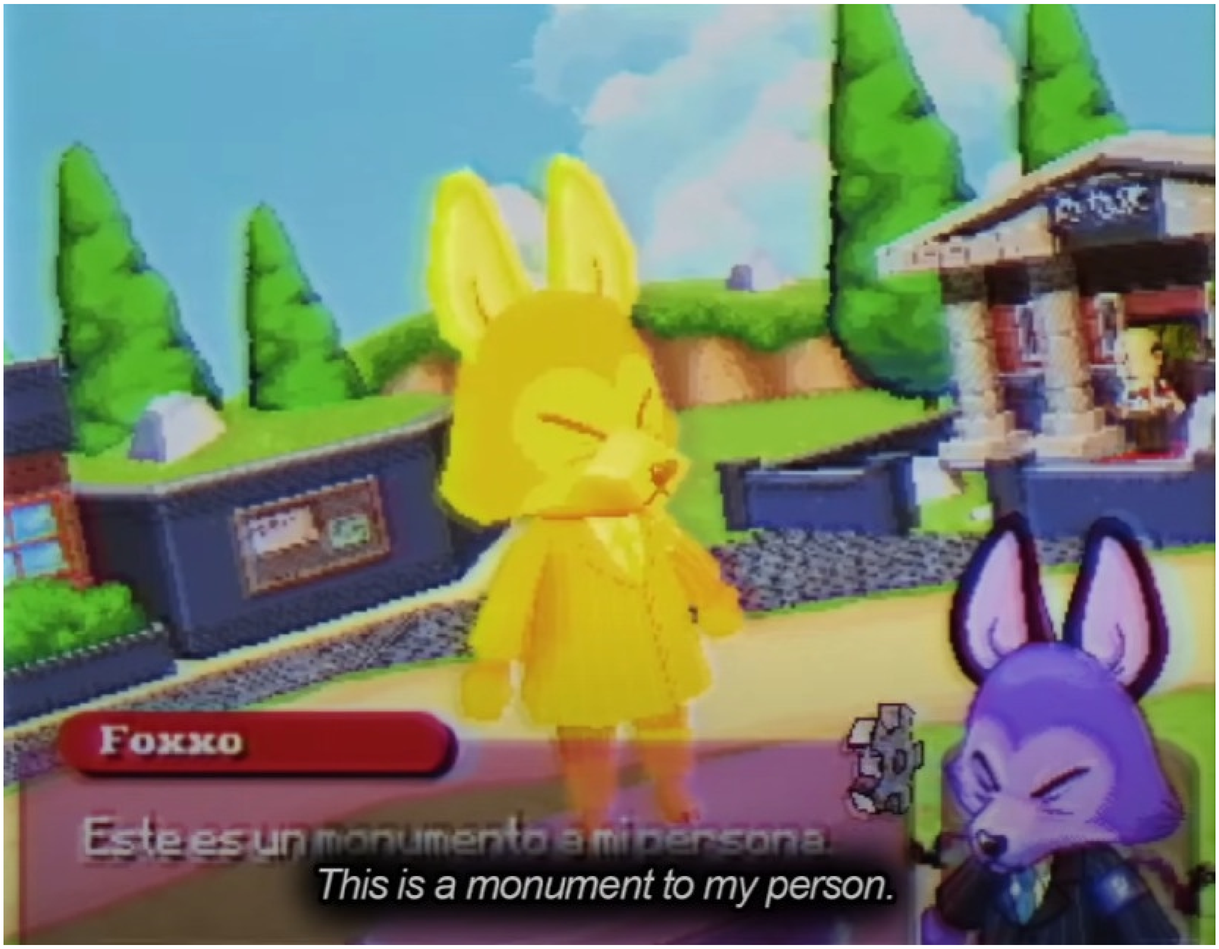
I have a fundamental problem with all these ARGs, one that pains me all the more because I am so thrilled by so many aspects of them. The problem is that once you dig into them, once you piece together the underlying narrative from all the tiny clues, interpret the ambiguities, and see the broader picture -

The picture sort of sucks.

Ben Drowned, FNAF, Petscop, Catastrophe Crow boil down to the same residual dew: Children died. (Either murdered or just tragically.) Their spirits haunt the game cartridge/animatronics. All the scant hints point to the cause. (Ben Drowned spoils it in the title.) It's not only sort of banal but also the story that you could probably guess at without reading into the deep lore, just from the story's general vibe.

It's a fundamentally boring answer to a fascinating puzzle, and worse, it reveals that there was no true value in the puzzle being presented as it was. The abstraction and postmodern technique of the narrative contribute nothing to its overall meaning. They exist with the *sole* aim to obfuscate, because horror only works when unexplained. Rather than leave the horror unexplained, though, the way Kubrick would in The Shining (which deliberately strips out overt explanations that exist in the book it adapts), or Lynch would in anything, these works are attempting to have their cake and eat it: there's stupid lore that explains everything, but it's just a little hard to find. In that sense, rather than being a rejection of the current cultural milieu toward works that make simple sense, this trend seems more like an attempt to reinject that milieu into one of the few genres of storytelling that had effectively rejected it. (It reads similarly to all the Babadook-inspired indie horror films of the past decade where the monster is some transparent allegory for grief or trauma or something.)

So what's the story of Valle Verde?



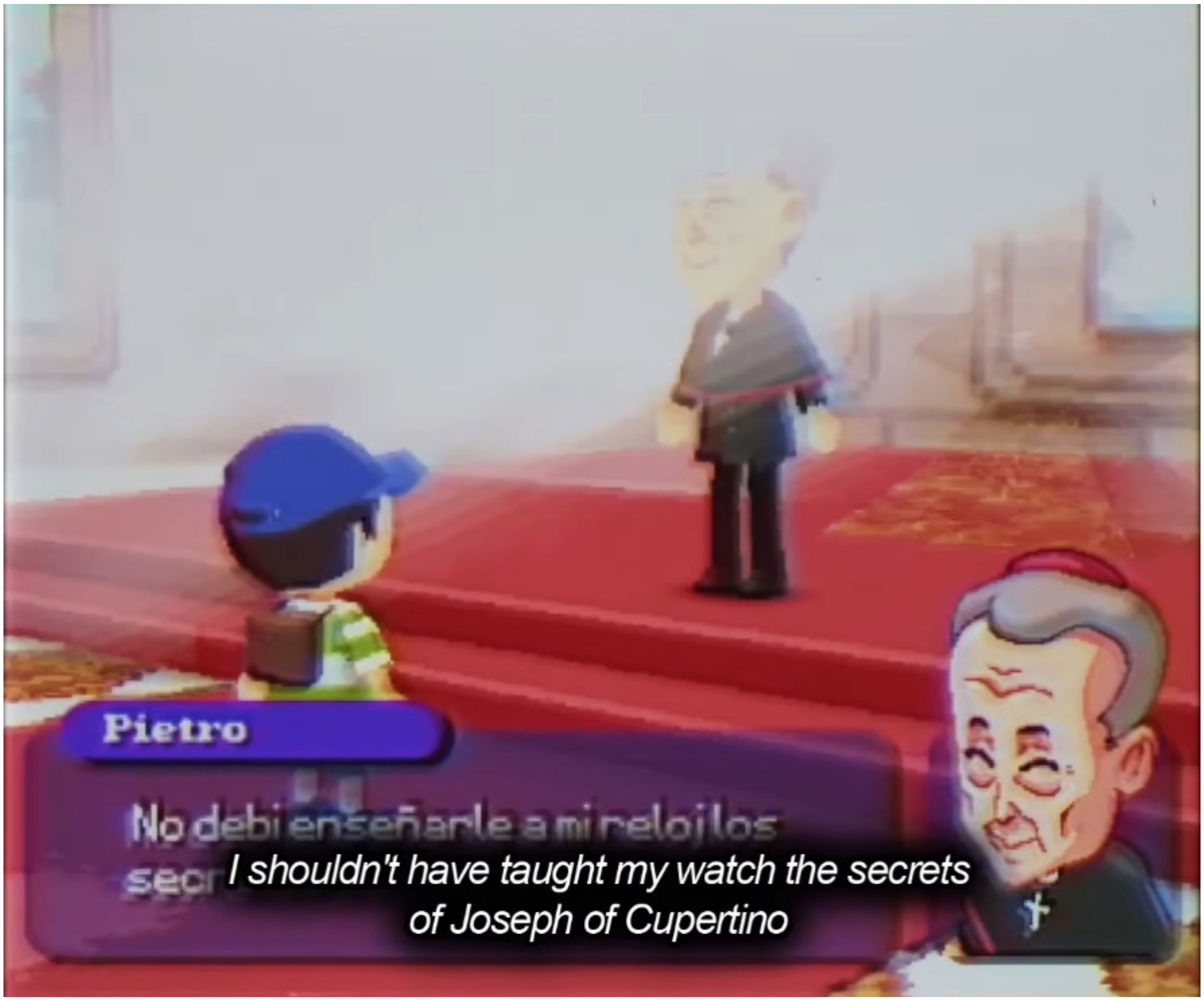
Este es un monumento a mi persona.

This is a monument to my person.

I won't go into a Game Theory breakdown of every symbol and detail. As far as I can tell, this is what's going on:

Valle Verde, the fiction within the fiction, is a Japanese video game developed with experimental technology called THBrain that gives it a sophisticated and advanced artificial intelligence capable of making on-the-fly alterations to the game's script. Valle Verde, the series of videos, depicts an investigation into certain malfunctioning elements of the game prior to its release. The player character, self-identified as TEST05, is actually played by two "agents" (of what agency is unclear) named Pablo and Robert testing the game and chronicling anomalous behavior.

The series of glitches and other bizarre things they record seems to depict a theological battle between Valle Verde's freemasonic villagers, led by Foxxo (*remember that the next elections*), and the Catholic Church, led by Pietro (possibly an avatar for St. Peter, the first pope and guardian of the gates of heaven).



Pietro

No debi enseñarle a mi reloj los sec

I shouldn't have taught my watch the secrets of Joseph of Cupertino

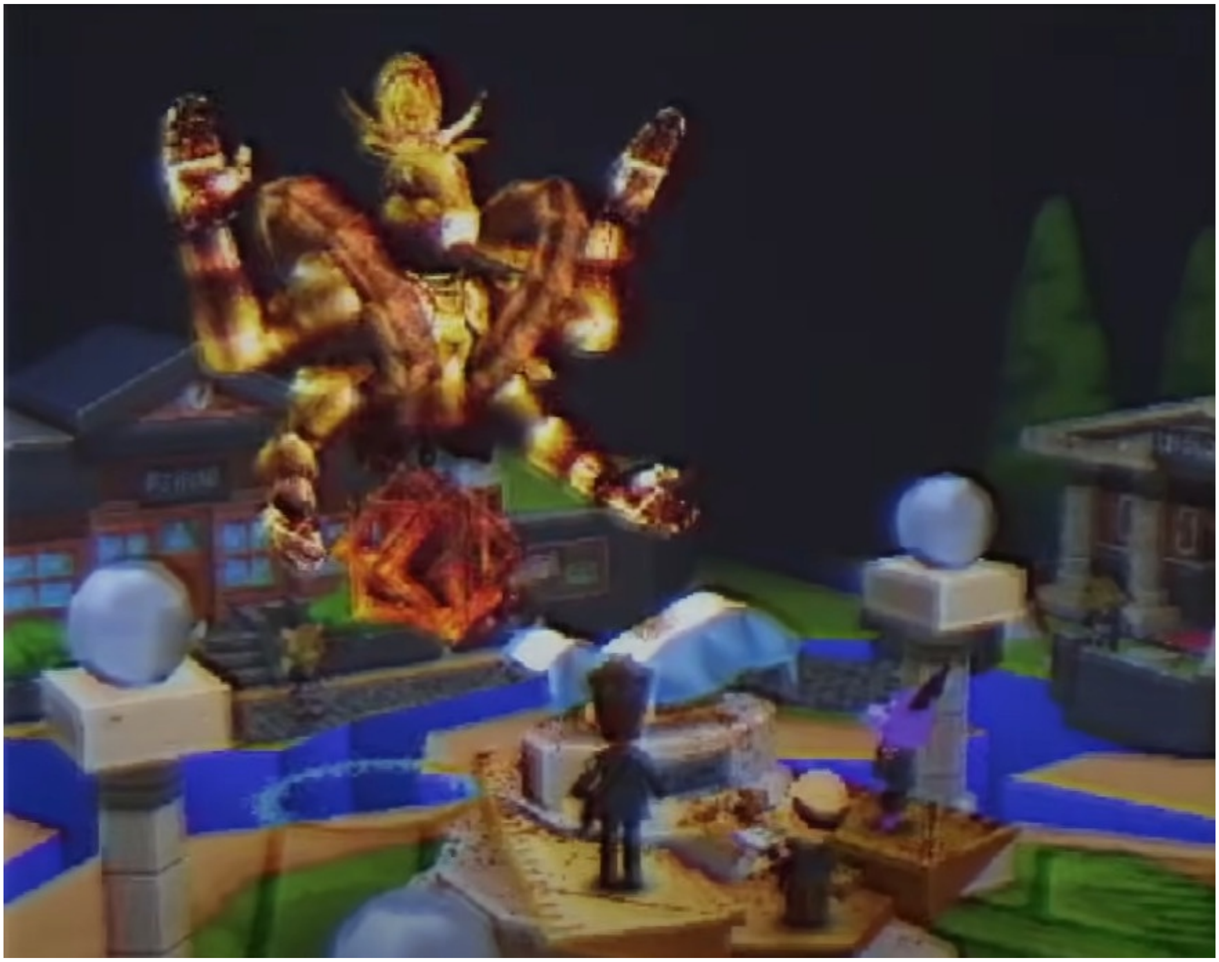
Joseph of Cupertino is the patron saint of aviation. It's a "time flies" pun.

It's unclear how much autonomy either of these factions have, even knowing that there is apparently a super-sophisticated AI capable of injecting novel information. Pietro at times breaks the fourth wall and addresses Pablo directly by name; the villagers don't break the fourth wall, but do all sorts of stuff that is described by the tapes as anomalous. The AI seems like the obvious culprit, but in Valle Verde 2, Pablo actually meets the AI, who claims to have sequestered themselves from the rest of the game because they didn't want to partake in the villagers' rituals, and who has even disabled all their language libraries except Spanish to avoid comprehending the screams of the children trapped inside the game.

Oh yeah. Children are dying.

The THBrain seems to not only enable incredible AI, but is a way to upload humans into the video game (maybe this is unrelated to THBrain? I'm fuzzy on that point). Several children have already been uploaded and are presumed dead; currently, an Argentinian child named Matias is trapped in the game. Matias is the only other character besides Pietro capable of breaking the fourth wall, due to being a real person; he is aware of Pablo as an "agent" and suggests at some sort of conspiracy outside the game, which has not been explicated in much detail in the available videos.

The reason the children are dying is eventually revealed: the freemasonic villagers are sacrificing them to their false god, Moloch.

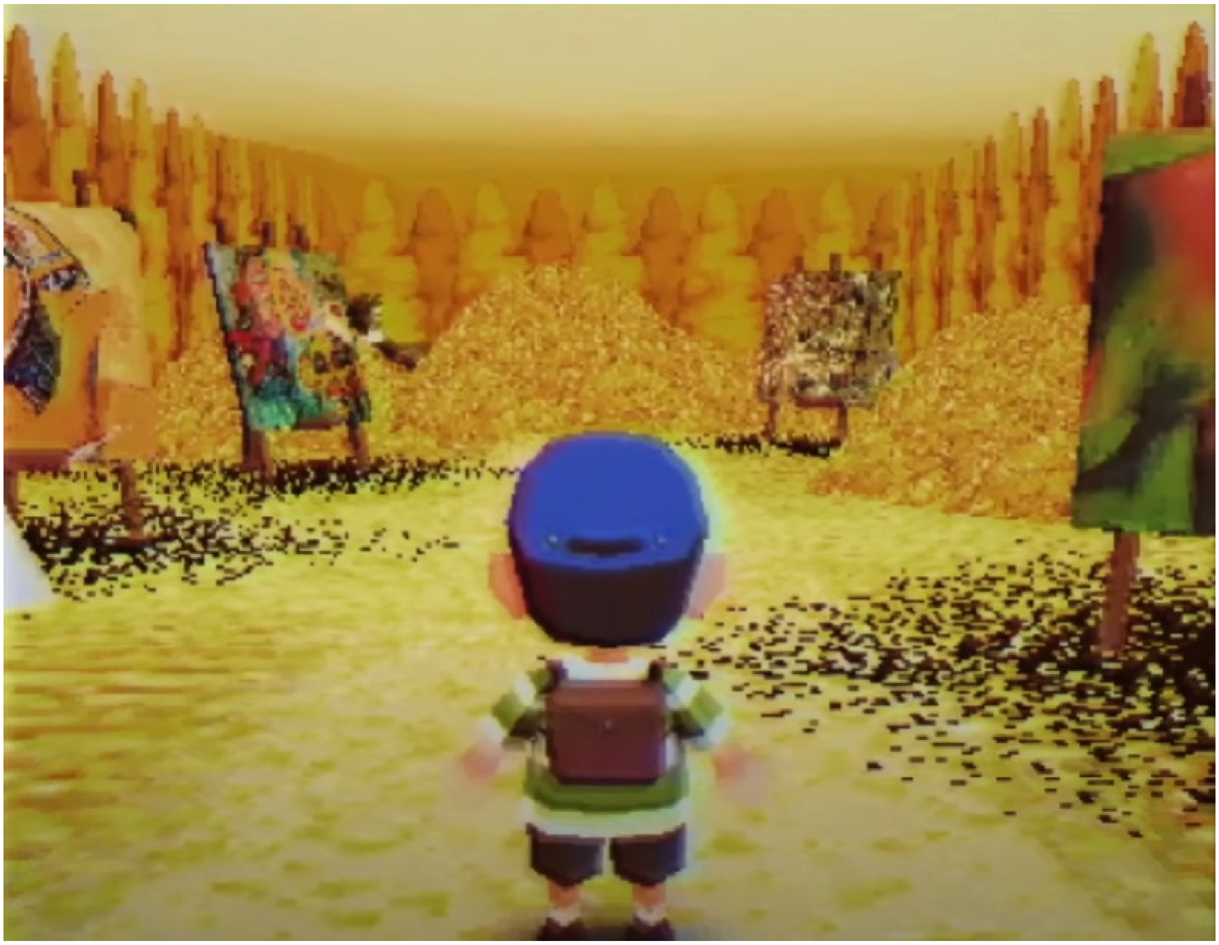


I'm not kidding about the freemasonry. Note the Argentinian flag.

There are other plot elements that are a bit murkier; Valle Verde seems to be a nexus of several unrelated video games, which can be accessed through an in-game library, and it is within this nexus that Moloch lives, and perhaps where the underlying purpose behind the villagers' actions lurks. There is also a recurring motif of a coming Christian apocalypse, likened to Noah's flood. After the freemasonic sacrifice, a doomsday clock ticks closer to midnight. Are the masons unwittingly provoking God's wrath? The series is framed as footage from 1997 that was unearthed in the modern day, so was this apocalypse averted, or did the apocalypse simply exist within the game, with no bearing on reality? The series remains ongoing; future installments may clarify.

But the underlying issue remains that, for me at least, the basic conflict in its simplicity and lack of ambiguity seems inadequately matched to the unique, impressive, and open-ended presentation. It retroactively makes me wonder what the point is of telling the story the way Valle Verde is told, if its story is in essence the Church versus Satan-worshippers, with clear moral and ideological lines drawn. Doesn't a more conventional narrative make sense for this sort of story?

There's a scene early on when the player character traverses a series of rooms corresponding to the Seven Deadly Sins. The sin of greed is depicted, not simply with stacks of gold, but with works of modern art:



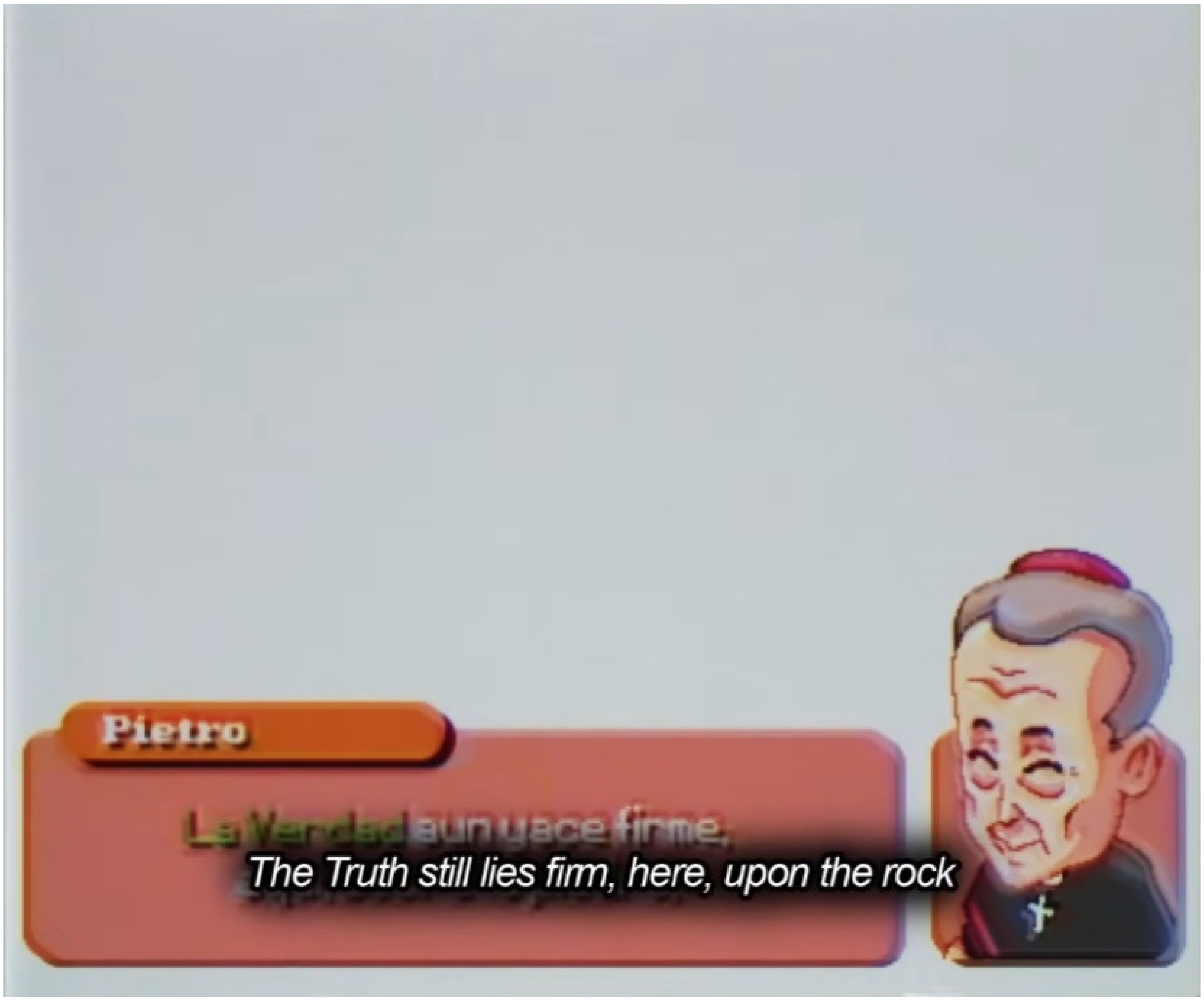
As the player proceeds through the room, they discover a dumpster where Renaissance artwork by Titian and Michelangelo is trashed:

The message here is almost fatuous. It's also deeply ironic. Valle Verde is a work that has far more in common, in terms of its formalistic technique, with Picasso than Titian. Is it a lack of self-awareness that puts this here? Or perhaps something else?

The novel Infinite Jest ends abruptly, with none of its plot points resolved. In this way it's similar to the titan of American postmodern literature, Gravity's Rainbow, which peters out without explaining the conspiracy that has driven its narrative. Infinite Jest plays a trick, though, as devious as it is facile. The final 200 pages of the book have been cut off and moved to the front. The story's beginning is a flash forward that, in its lack of context and confusing abstractions, is difficult to make sense of on first read. Upon rereading after finishing the book, though, it clearly contains the answers to all the unresolved plot threads.

If postmodernism could be described as an artistic period of uncertainty and obscured truth that was a response to the similarly uncertain Cold War era, where the inner machinations of governments may at any time cause the annihilation of the entire world, then what Infinite Jest did, published just a few years after the Cold War's end, could be seen as a reclamation of truth.

Truth itself is a concept deeply interwoven with Christianity. In Valle Verde, Pietro even calls it out with a green highlight to indicate its importance:



La Verdad aun yace firme,

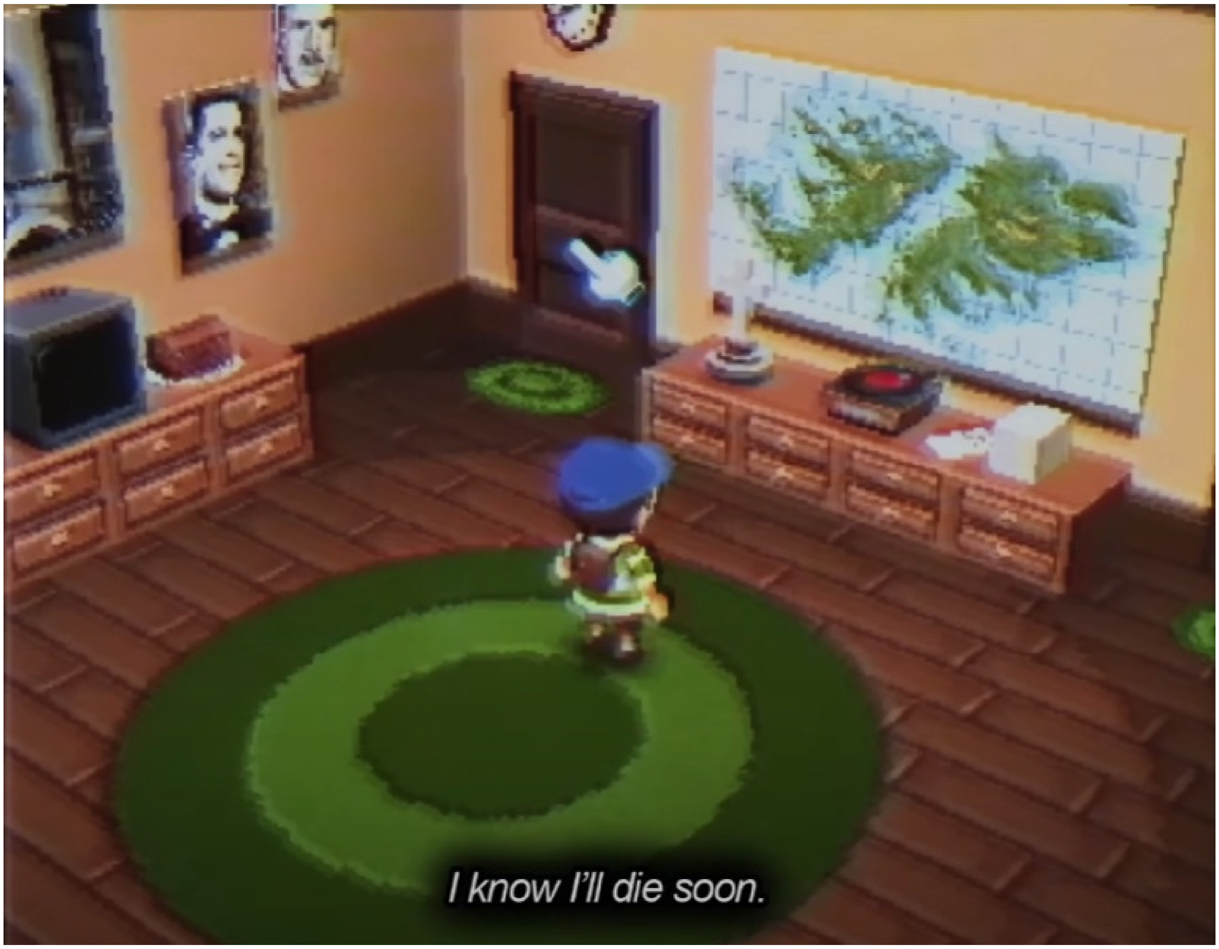
The Truth still lies firm, here, upon the rock

La Verdad sounds suspiciously similar to Valle Verde. Coincidence?

The context of this quote comes after the villagers destroy the church; Pietro reassures the player that La Verdad remains unchanging, and that this tribulation shall pass.

Might Valle Verde itself then be an Infinite Jest style reclamation, using the formalistic techniques of postmodernism that are so useful for obscuring truth to obscure what is, at its core, a simple and morally black-and-white tale of Christianity versus wicked idolatry?

There is a real-world allegorical undercurrent to Valle Verde that makes this reading even more appealing. Valle Verde's creator, Alluvium, is Argentinian, and the game is steeped in references to Argentinian history and politics.



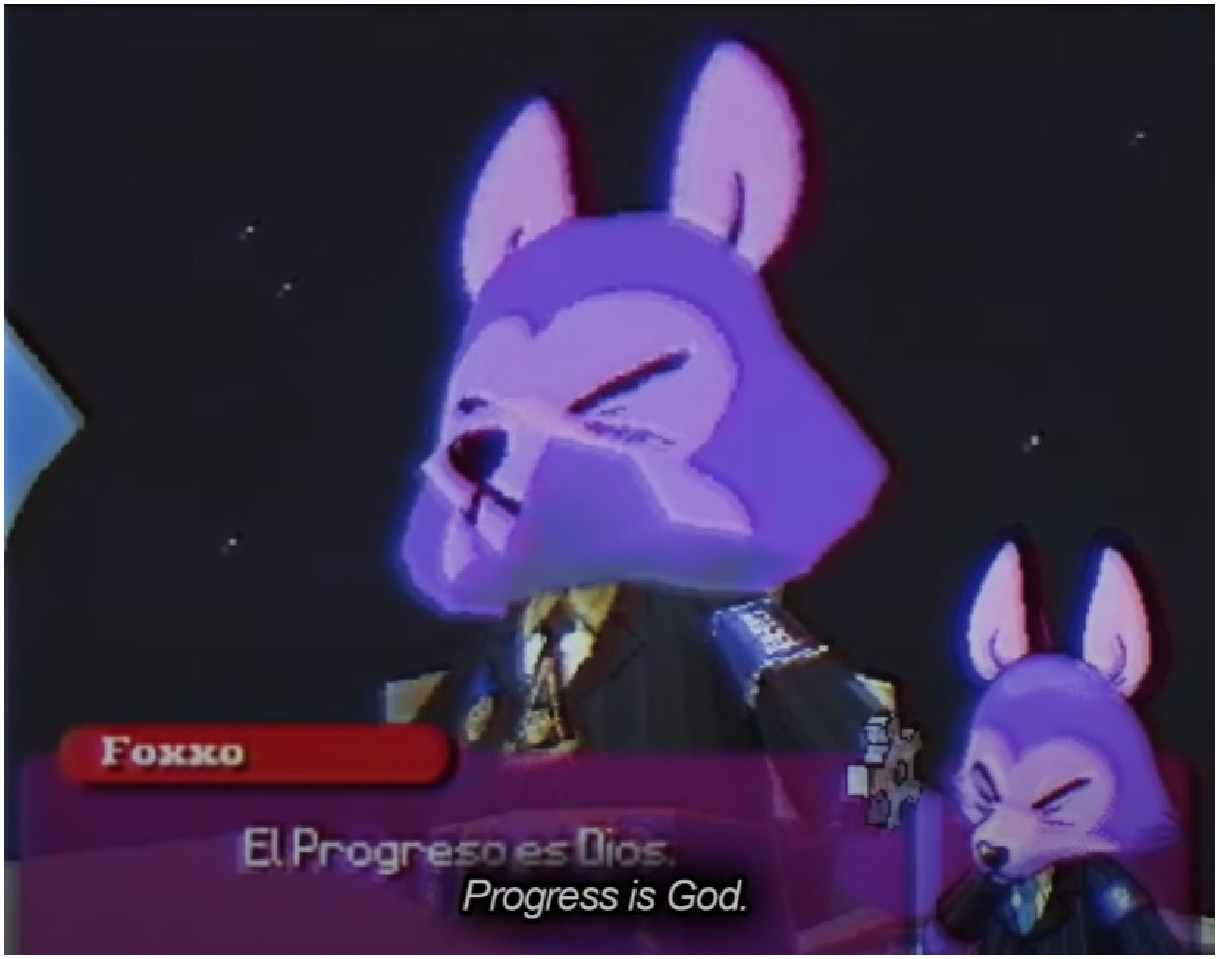
That's a map of the Falkland Islands and a picture of former Argentine dictator Juan Peron.

At one point, when the villagers destroy the church (with the unwitting? help of the player character, who seems to have no moral interest in anything happening, and who only does whatever anyone asks him, whether it's Pietro or Foxxo), a highly overt reference is made to the death of Pope John Paul I, who reigned for only 33 days in the late 1970s before he died, officially, of a heart attack. The abruptness of his death, and the failure of the corrupt, Mafia- and freemason-connected Vatican Bank in the years that followed, have led to conspiracy theories that John Paul was actually murdered by freemasons within the Vatican so that they may continue to corrupt the Catholic Church.

Specifically, the conspiracy posits the assassination was done by the freemasonic branch P2, or Propaganda Due, an illegal fascistic secret society that contained many high-ranking members of Italian politics (including Silvio Berlusconi), whose goal was to act as a shadow government that could prevent the rise of communism within Italy. (P2 definitely existed; how much it actually influenced Italian politics is a matter of debate.)

Though primarily an Italian organization, P2 had several influential members from other countries, notably Argentina, where several politicians and military leaders at the highest levels were involved. As a nation, Argentina is something of a tragedy; at one point considered a rising economic powerhouse, its excellent geographic and demographic advantages were squandered by a long succession of corrupt leaders, including those involved in P2. It makes sense, then, why an Argentinian creator like Alluvium might be so interested in critiquing the evils of freemasonic corruption.

Valle Verde satirizes Argentina's leadership via Foxxo, not only through his freemasonic devil rituals, but also in more down-to-earth ways. In his introduction, Foxxo provides the player character 100 coins, telling him to "remember that the next elections" (Foxxo's catchphrase, despite him clearly stating he has been given absolute authority over the area by The Smiling One); moments later, when the player turns to leave, Foxxo mugs him from behind and puts him 99,999 coins in debt.



Through the use of masonic slogans like liberté, égalité, fraternité (which is written over what appears to be a portal to Hell) and masonic symbols such as the Statue of Liberty and Washington Monument, there's an undercurrent that expands this freemasonic secular/Satanic conspiracy beyond Argentinian politics and into the post-Enlightenment secular governments that have come to rule the so-called free world. "Progress is God," the freemasons state during their child sacrifice ritual. (Foxxo is joined in this scene by the village's museum curator, representing knowledge, and its scientist, representing progress.)

It's this kind of framing that makes me wonder about the previous scene depicting Picasso paintings as emblematic of the sin of Greed, compared to Renaissance paintings in the dumpster; is there a general theme here raging against modernity in all its forms, compared to a fundamentally good and absolute Christian religious truth? If so, it makes sense why Valle Verde is presented as it is, so abstractly; it shows a world rendered incomprehensible by modernity, but one that can be sifted and parsed to find incontrovertible religious salvation still shining underneath.

It is a rejection of "progress," using the formal techniques of "progress." In a milieu where the promises of the Enlightenment seem to have hit a dead end, where the freedom secularism once promised has given rise to corruption and abuses akin to those the Catholic Church of the Renaissance once inflicted, perhaps the sense of going back appeals.

The English literary world post-Infinite Jest itself also seems to have returned to the past; the works published today are realistic in style and scope, eschewing most formal techniques pioneered across the preceding century. Though I doubt that was David Foster Wallace's goal, it's what he created. Valle Verde, which is so explicit in its fundamental belief in Christianity, is probably far more deliberate in its rejection of the world as it currently exists.

Though there have always been voices calling for a return to the past, perhaps this is a mindset particularly enticing in the information age, when meaning seems so fragmented as to be ungraspable. Though Valle Verde is conscious of what it is doing formally in a way that, say, Ben Drowned is not, the inner simplicity of these ARG narratives obfuscated by abstraction strikes me as a collective yearning for clearly explicated, graspable truths in a world where such a thing seems increasingly impossible. Almost a fantasy: If only this incomprehensible eldritch horror could be explained by a 10-minute Game Theory video!

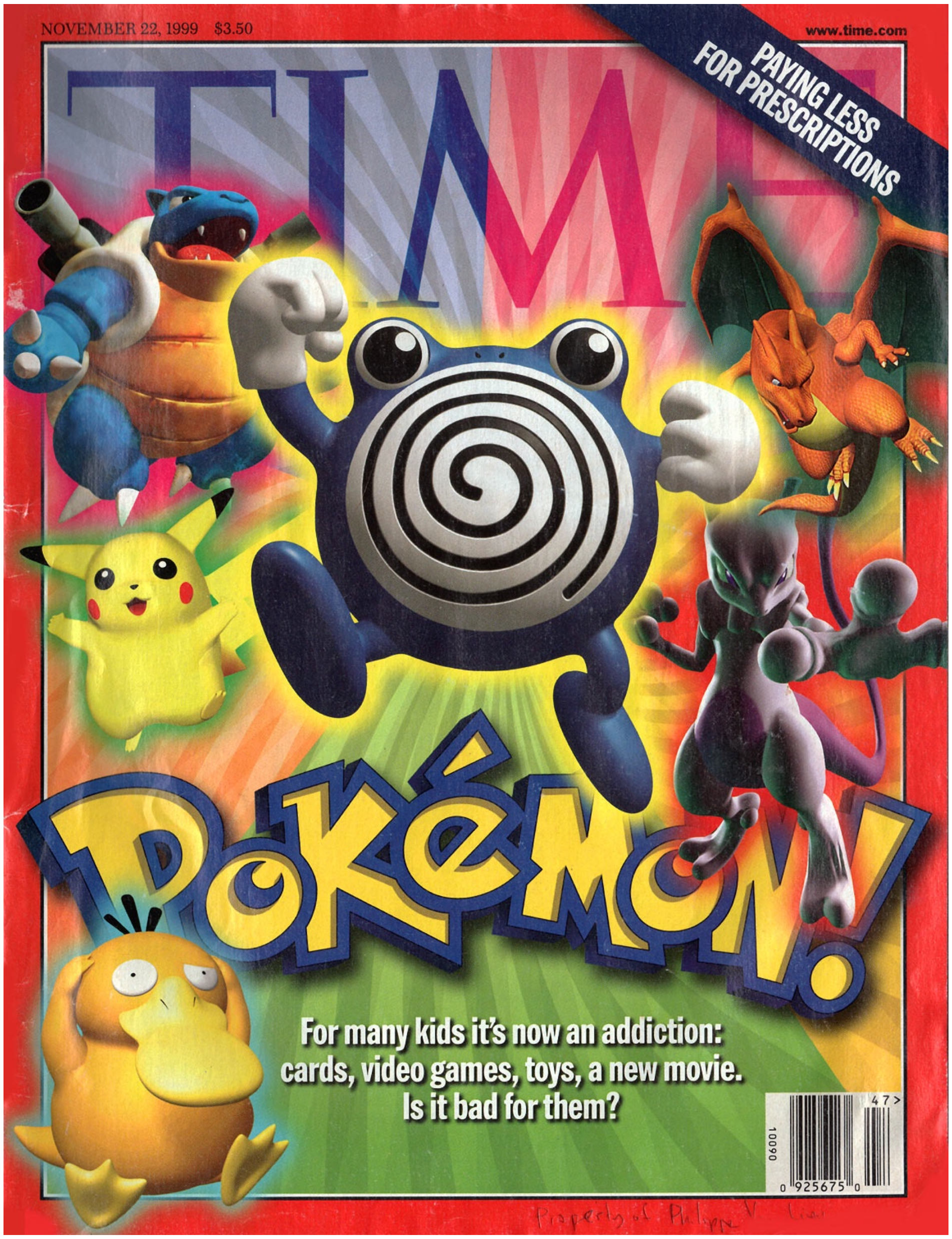
(The eldritch itself is a horror rooted in incomprehensibility. Making it explicable banishes it entirely, the way the protagonist of Valle Verde banishes a demon by holding aloft a crucifix. La Verdad triumphs. Couldn't our lives be so simple?)

Not every ARG is like this. Kane Pixels, another creator I would highlight for their exceptional technical talent and avant garde storytelling, has created far more nuanced and ambiguous narratives with works like The Oldest View, which deals with themes of nostalgia and memory without being resolvable into a simple pat sentence synopsis. Overall, I consider this entire collection of web original horror creators to be blessed with both the talent and mindset to create truly innovative works of fiction, even if many of them are outsider artists fumbling around just trying to scare someone; as outsiders, these confused anti-confusions of theme and meaning might be par for the course.

Valle Verde is an impressive work of art, even if it is an avant garde work that paradoxically rejects itself. Perhaps in that paradox more could be said than had it remained fully self-consistent. Either way, I eagerly await what comes next.

Chapter 6: The Making Of: When I Win the World Ends

I. 1999


NOVEMBER 22, 1999 $3.50
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TIME
PAYING LESS FOR PRESCRIPTIONS
POKÉMON!
For many kids it's now an addiction: cards, video games, toys, a new movie. Is it bad for them?

It was the year of the cubicle movie. It was the year of Fight Club, of Office Space, of Being John Malkovich, of Three Kings, of The Matrix, and of American Beauty. It was the year of suburban malaise, of eternal sunshine, of ceaseless normality. A year of United States hegemony; a year whose chief terror was that THIS WAS IT.

Before the millennium turned and the towers fell, there was an initial challenge to this order, a completely inconsequential one made consequential by a newly minted 24/7 news media machine running out of noise to fill dead air now that people were sick to bursting of the Clinton impeachment. This challenge came not through war, revolution, or violence, but through entertainment. Children's entertainment.

And I was a child. Unaware of any cultural context, I knew only one thing: I loved Pokémon. I really, really loved Pokémon.

I owned Red Version, Blue Version, Yellow Version, Pokémon Pinball, Pokémon Stadium, Pokémon Snap, Hey You Pikachu, a Pokémon Tetris sort of puzzle game, even the Pokémon TCG game for Gameboy. I had ten to fifteen strategy guides for the games, an encyclopedia of the 151 Pokémon, a choose your own adventure book, an I Spy-style book. I had Pokémon figurines, Pokémon plushies, toy Poké Balls, toy Pokédexes. I had Pokémon stamps and Pokémon stickers and a deck of Pokémon cards. Not trading cards, just a standard 52-card deck with Pokémon pictures on it. Of course I also had the trading cards. A complete set of the first three runs, plus a special Mew card you could get from I dunno Toys R Us or something as part of some promotion. I had a guide for the card game that explained which cards were good or bad even though I didn't even play the card game. I had a Pokémon Tamagotchi and Pokémon pencils and Pokémon erasers and Ash Ketchum's hat and I dressed up as Ash Ketchum for Halloween. Of course I watched every episode of the anime, and in notebooks I drew doodles of existing Pokémon and came up with names for new Pokémon. My father had died that year.

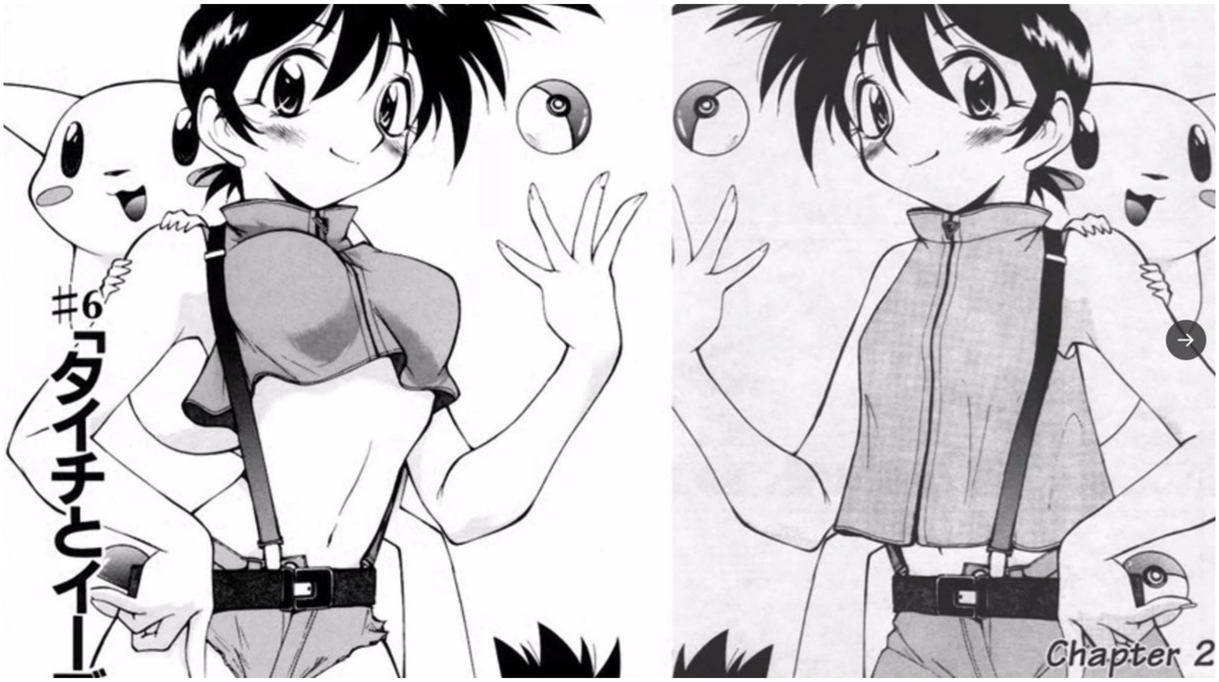
My father was a sports fanatic. Traditional sports. He, too, collected. Sports memorabilia, baseball cards, figures of famous stars. When I was an infant, he drove me on a cross country road trip to Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where I became a part owner of the Green Bay Packers. He had always wanted me to grow up and pursue professional sports. When I was born, the doctor apparently said to start looking for football colleges, a quote he saved in a scrapbook of baby photos. He had played sports himself, in college; he was a baseball catcher, until a hitter accidentally struck him in the head with a full force swing.

Almost everything I personally remember about him involves him dying. He was sick for a long time, and I remember hospitals and hospital beds and strange smells and gauze. And then one day my mother told me he died.

He was a charismatic man, very social and very popular. He had many friends and a lot of family, all of whom had constantly been around our house. Once he was gone, they stopped coming around. Then it was just me and my mother, who was not a fanatic for anything, except maybe her job as an elementary school teacher, which consumed her time as she assiduously prepared lesson plans and graded tests until late at night. When my father died, she got into some argument with his side of the family, the details of which I still don't fully understand, and afterward they no longer spoke. Her own family lived far away, out-of-state, seen only at Christmas. The house became quiet.

And I… played… Pokémon.

II. The Electric Tale of Pikachu

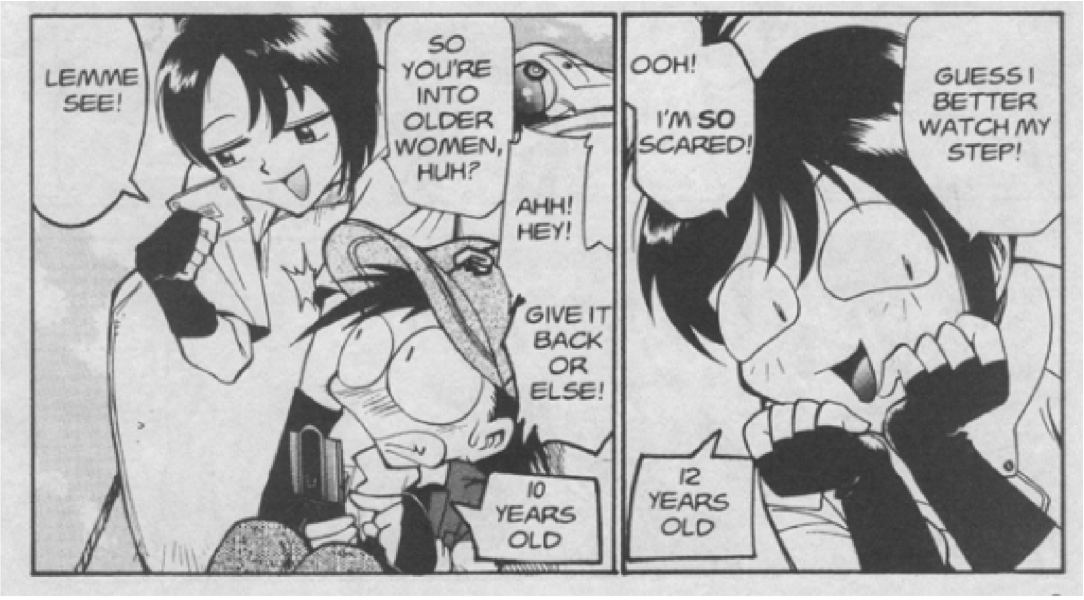


Toshihiro Ono was a mangaka primarily known for shotacon and futanari hentai. His credits such as Innyou Megami and Anal Justice made him a no-brainer pick for the officially licensed Pokémon manga, Electric Tale of Pikachu, as it too would feature a 10-year-old boy as the protagonist.

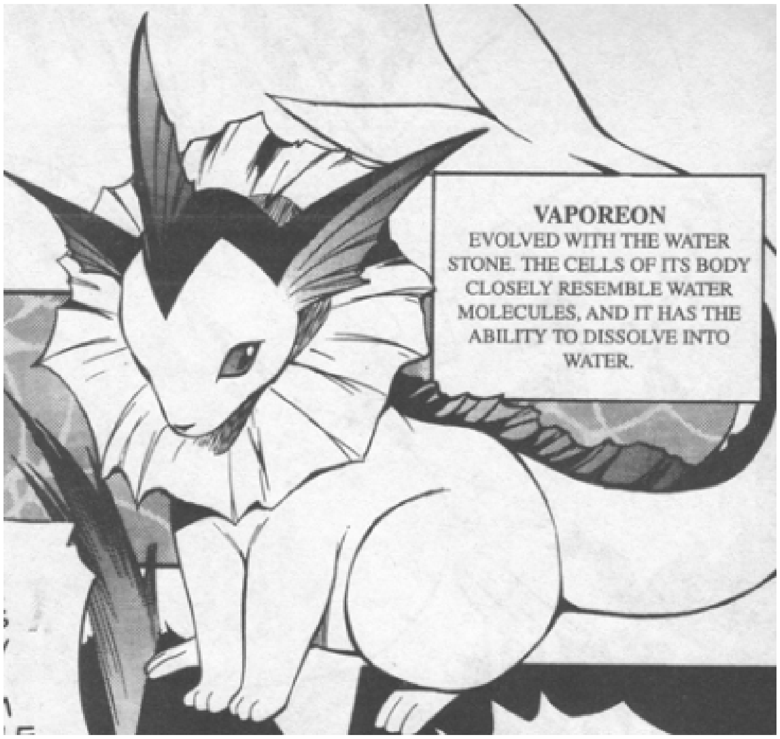
This manga would be the foundation for my conception of what Pokémon was, narratively. Though I also had the Pokémon Adventures manga that ran concurrently and which has by now long outlasted it, Electric Tale left a significantly deeper imprint on my memory.

In summary, Electric Tale is a retelling of the first two seasons of the anime. Ash Ketchum is the main character, he's accompanied by Misty and later Brock, his rival is Gary, and Team Rocket harangues him.

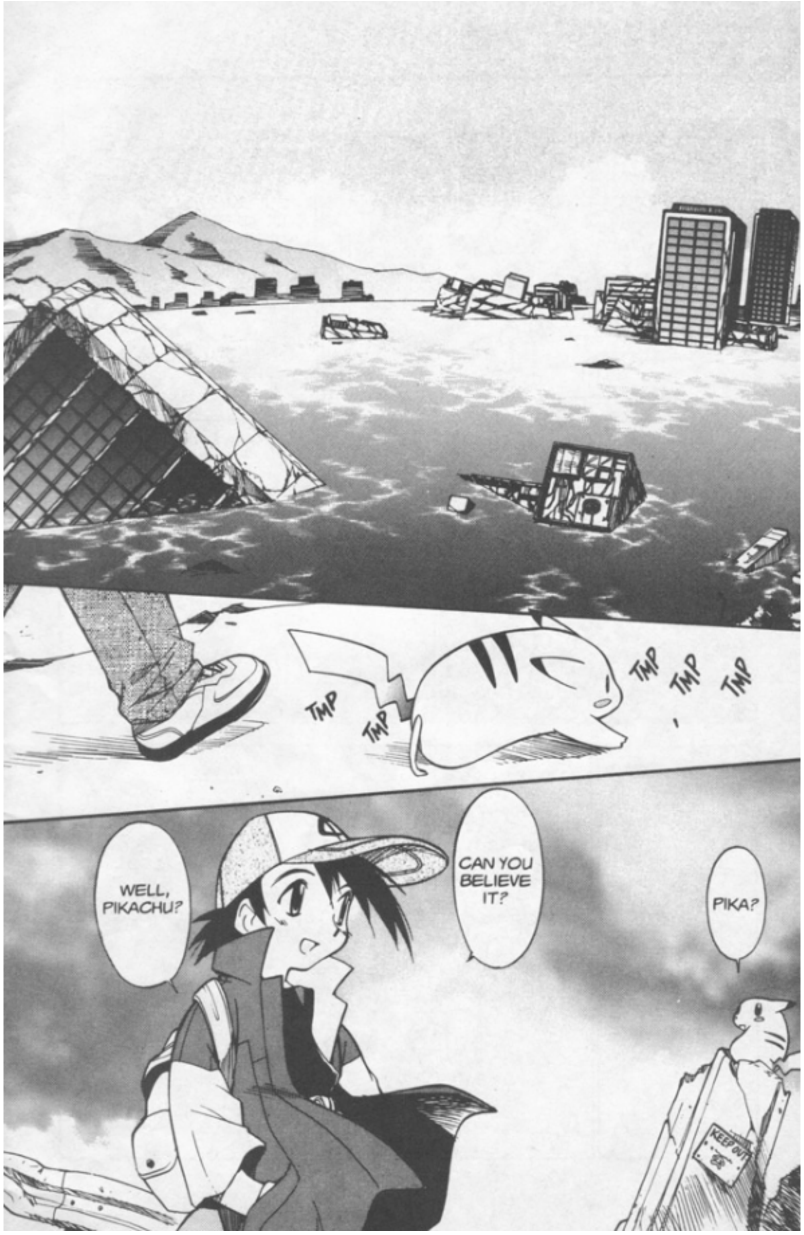
What sets Electric Tale apart is its tone, which is far more adult than Adventures and the anime. Obviously, part of this comes from the author's primary area of expertise being hentai. Even in the censored English version, there is a sense of sexual playfulness in how every single female character is an older woman who likes to tease Ash about his romantic interests.


LEMME SEE!
SO YOU'RE INTO OLDER WOMEN, HUH?
AHH! HEY!
GIVE IT BACK OR ELSE!
10 YEARS OLD
OOH! I'M SO SCARED!
GUESS I BETTER WATCH MY STEP!
12 YEARS OLD

But there are other elements that creep in unrelated to sex, due to the perspective of someone only used to speaking to adults who suddenly has to speak to children. Ono doesn't really get the childish fantasy of leaving at 10 being normal in society, so he introduces an element where Ash can only get a one year deferment from school and will have to return unless he hits it big. Team Rocket are former competitive hopefuls who flamed out and then, with no education or work experience to speak of, had no choice but to turn to crime. The Pokémon are depicted more realistically, often eschewing the toyetic mascot elements of their designs.

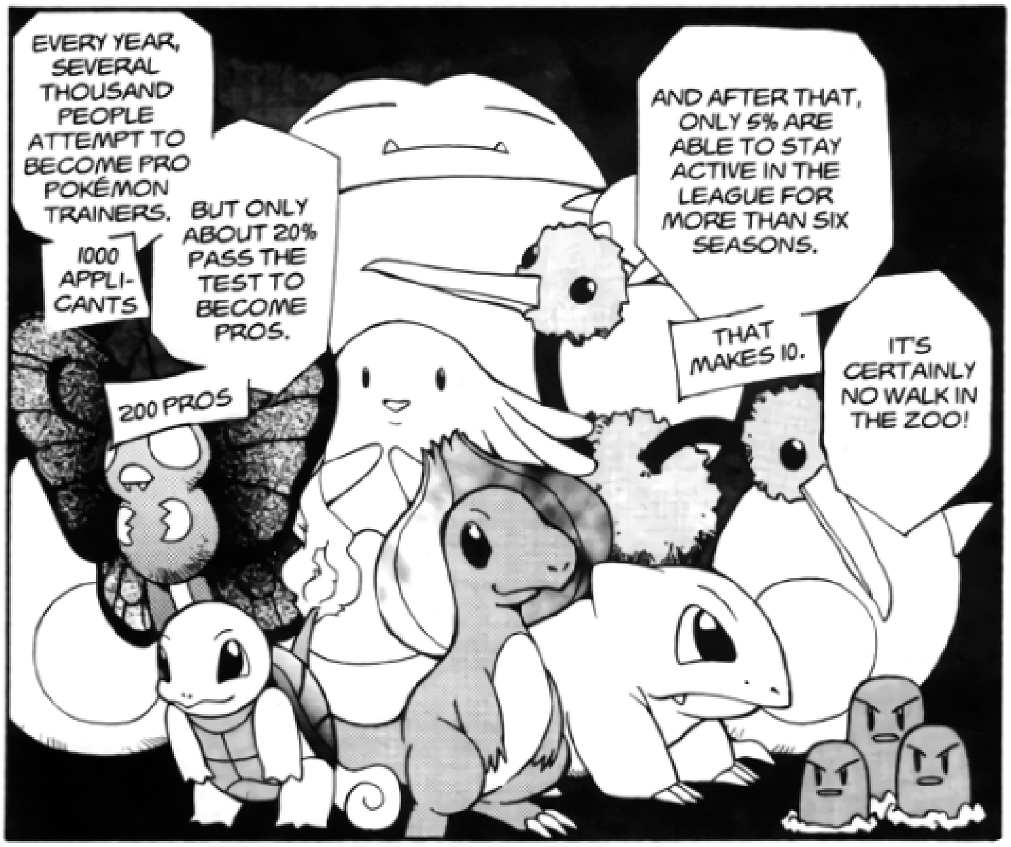

VAPOREON
EVOLVED WITH THE WATER STONE. THE CELLS OF ITS BODY CLOSELY RESEMBLE WATER MOLECULES, AND IT HAS THE ABILITY TO DISSOLVE INTO WATER.

And the landscapes are often wistful, even apocalyptic in their presentation:



This more sedate, mature, realistic depiction of Pokémon became what I wanted Pokémon to be, what I projected onto an original Red and Blue version that left everything open to interpretation, and what would increasingly frustrate me with the series as it deviated more toward bombastic villain groups with goofy destroy-the-world plots. (Which was what put me off Pokémon Adventures.)

Amid all this, one panel stuck with me in particular. One panel I would think about ever since I first saw it as a child, that would turn around in my head and keep coming back. That panel would eventually—over two decades later—become the basis for When I Win the World Ends, the seed from which an entire story grew:


EVERY YEAR, SEVERAL THOUSAND PEOPLE ATTEMPT TO BECOME PRO POKÉMON TRAINERS.
1000 APPLI-CANTS
BUT ONLY ABOUT 20% PASS THE TEST TO BECOME PROS.
200 PROS
AND AFTER THAT, ONLY 5% ARE ABLE TO STAY ACTIVE IN THE LEAGUE FOR MORE THAN SIX SEASONS.
THAT MAKES 10.
IT'S CERTAINLY NO WALK IN THE ZOO!

III. The Unkillable Demon King

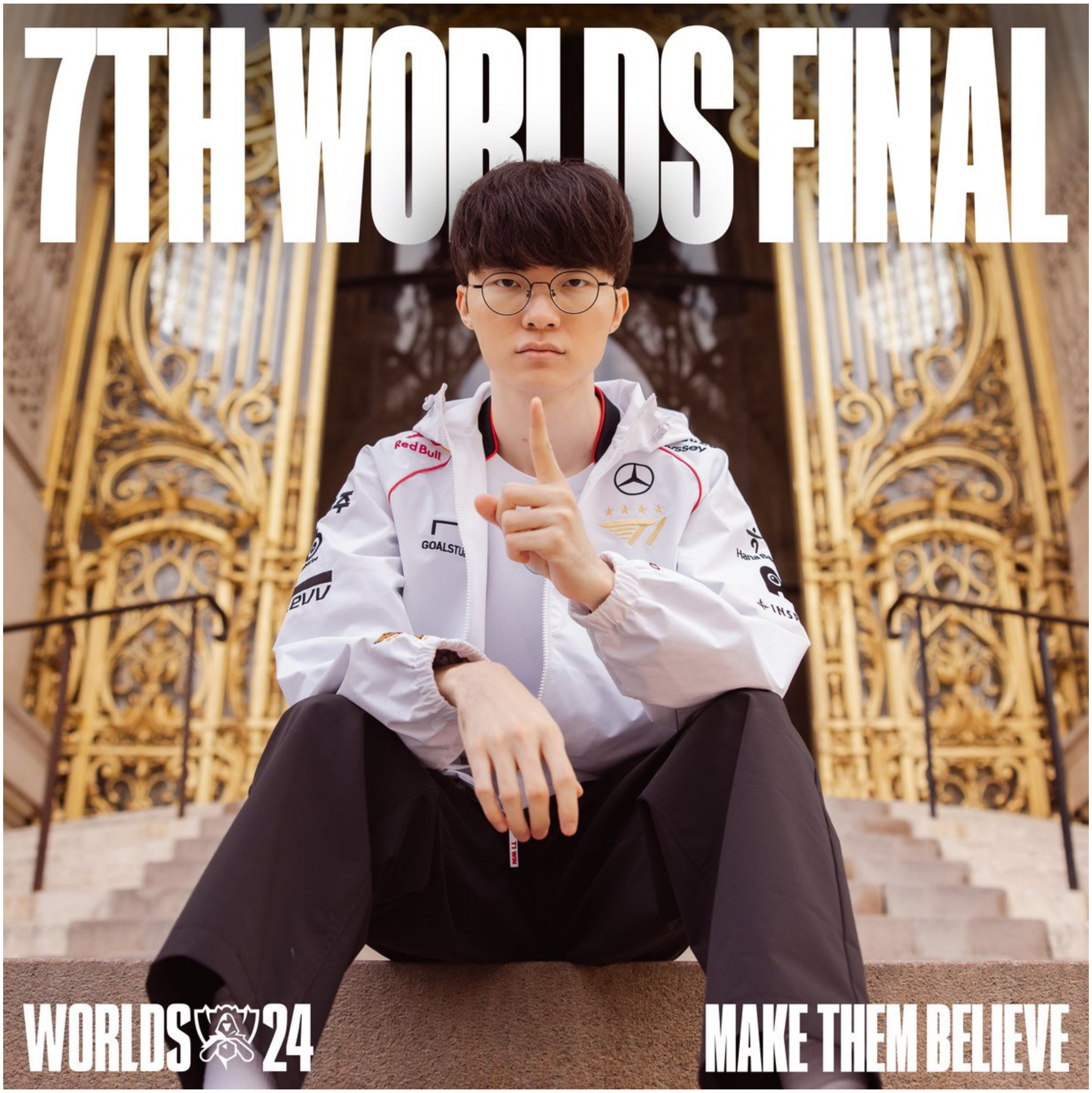
But in the interim, the seed remained dormant. 1999 fell away. I grew up. I played later Pokémon games and increasingly lost interest by around Gen 4 and 5. Then I went to college.

That's when I started playing League of Legends.

I was something of a psychopath in college. I operated on a strict schedule and did not deviate. Wake up, read 50 pages of classic literature, write 2,000 words, go to classes, study, and then by about four in the afternoon all my obligations were done and it was League of Legends until midnight.

I wasn't actually interested in the League of Legends esports scene in its infancy. In 2012, I was actually invited to attend its World Championship in Los Angeles and refused. (When I received this invitation, I had just finished reading Homestuck for the first time, and was caught in a month-long haze in which I could do little but bask within what I considered the greatest artistic achievement I'd seen in my life. It was this month that inspired Modern Cannibals.) I only liked playing the game and watching Dunkey videos.

It wasn't until the next year, when a girl I was interested in recommended I watch, that I tuned in to my first professional League of Legends game, at the 2013 World Championship. It was there that I got to watch this new, hyped, upcoming Korean player who had apparently taken the pro scene by storm that season. That player was Faker.



It has seemingly become essential to the narrative of any sport that there is "the man who always wins." American football has Tom Brady, and the moment Brady retired, he was replaced by Patrick Mahomes. Basketball has LeBron James, picking up the mantle from Michael Jordan. It's as if someone being "the best" validates the skill-based promise of the sport, the fundamental top-down fairness of its premise, the idea that the person who wins is the best and deserved it. Faker would become the backbone of League of Legends esports and his ascendance correlated to that of the sport itself, from its humble roots at small-scale tournaments in places like Jönköping, Sweden, to max capacity arenas in the biggest cities in the world.

It's surprising, though, how the legend of Faker had already begun even before he won his first World Championship. League of Legends was designed as a clone of Defense of the Ancients (DotA), a popular mod for Warcraft III that emphasized competitive play. In its infancy, the competitive scene was mostly dominated by players who had migrated from DotA to League. They were older, winning thanks to a fundamental conceptual understanding of the game that was superior to everyone else, and frankly not very good in the aggregate. As League of Legends esports exploded in popularity from 2013 to 2015, these old pros would get filtered out swiftly, with even the biggest and most popular names retiring after only a couple of years in the scene.

Even once the new generation of League-grown talent ascended, though, careers were nasty, brutish, and short. The best players only remained on top for a season, as game patches dramatically changed viable strategies. Internationally the sport was dominated by Koreans, with the Korean regional league sometimes being seen as more difficult to win than the World Championship, where Koreans often breezed through uncompetitive Chinese, European, and North American squads.

This possibly affected the demographics of the professional scene. South Korea has mandatory military service, and leaving the pro scene to join the military was basically the end of a Korean player's career. This meant that it was rare to see a Korean player older than 25. Retiring in your early 20s was and remains common. Korean organizations, which had an infrastructural leg up on other regions due to the popularity of StarCraft 2 esports in the country, became adept at scouting promising players at 15 or 16, building them into top level competitive pros, wringing them dry for a few seasons with brutal training regimens, and spitting them out.

Faker was the exception. Though he had been discovered young by SK Telecom, a major Korean telecommunications company that did esports on the side, and gone through the training regimen, he refused to be spit out. He simply didn't stop. He won in 2013, then with a completely new four-man squad around him won again in 2015 and 2016 before narrowly losing the 2017 finals in a nail biter. Given League of Legends esports had only existed since 2011, he basically accounted for half of the championships up until that point. Nobody else, except for his teammates, had won more than once. And it was like it was known he would be this juggernaut the instant he manifested ex nihilo. Like it was known, even in 2013, that he would always win.

Then, Faker stopped winning.

By 2017, League of Legends esports was a titan. Venture capital firms, seeing the millions of eyeballs, thought that this was the next NBA in its infancy, and decided to get in on the ground floor. Multiple millions of dollars were pumped into the scene as even mediocre players in weak regions like North America pulled seven-digit salaries. In China, where League of Legends had become the national pastime, the nation's richest oligarchs ran teams for fun and vanity, outbidding Korean organizations for top Korean players in pursuit of a trophy that had gone to Korea every year since 2013. Riot, the studio developing the game, pumped tons of money into creating a professional sports product, with skilled announcers, dedicated arenas for regional leagues, live performances by musicians like Imagine Dragons and Lil Nas X, and all the other bells and whistles one might expect from a program watched on ESPN.

In this milieu, it seemed like Faker had finally reached his limit. He was still good, but not the best. Even as an individual, while everyone still considered him the "greatest of all time," he was considered outmatched by newer pros like Chovy and ShowMaker. 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 passed with no championships. In 2022, on a team of mostly rookies, he reached the world finals, but was ultimately beaten. Korea's stranglehold over the sport had been shaken by China, which had finally strung together some championships. People wondered if Faker would retire, although he had managed to avoid mandatory military service by representing Korea in the Olympics-esque Asian Games. He'd dealt with wrist injuries and his level of play dropped year over year. He just didn't seem to be that good anymore, potentially holding back his team of talented young players rather than leading them to victory.

Then, in 2023—

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuDqVxRE4vk

And in 2024—

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLUTx-JNBrA

In the end, never count out Touchdown Tom. 11 years of professional play, 5 world championships.

From this longwinded explanation, you might have realized that after watching that game in 2013, I became a League of Legends esports fanatic, fulfilling the prophecy set before me by my father though perhaps in not the way he would have expected.

And the things I become a fanatic about, I want to write a story about.

IV. Modern Cannibals

There's a deleted scene in Modern Cannibals, as Maximillion is driving Z. and her friends through the Utah desert. He starts to talk about Pokémon.

> "I bring it up because my university thesis was about Pokemon in particular how Pokemon has basically trained an entire generation of children to think in a completely different way than preceding generations my generation for instance our fad was Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles now I don't know how much you know about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles but from an educational standpoint we're talking absolute bankrupt complete and utter goose egg but Pokemon now Pokemon you see it's more like there's some substance to it you know that refrain Gotta Catch Em All right?" "..." "Well to most parents it looks like a marketing gimmick you make one hundred fifty-one characters and structure a game around collecting them the merchandising potential is astronomical kids buy one hundred fifty-one trading cards stickers coloring books figurines uh collectable lunchable toys I'm sure you've got some yourself."

He continues:

> "But really you look at the game itself before the big toy explosion the game itself the focus is placed less on the collection and more on the catalogue you're given a blank encyclopedia to fill and you fill it by capturing one hundred fifty-one Pokemon but the goal is to create a complete database of each and every one and this is what I argue is the educational core of the Pokemon series." His hands left the wheel to conceive of his idea in the cool air of the car, which remained steady on its ever-forward path. "Our modern era is no longer one of singular isolated knowledge it is one of the catalogue the database which is most clearly personified in the advent of the internet because now all knowledge can be at the fingertips of any one human being all that is needed is someone to go and put the catalogue together and presto whiz bang it's there think about it Z. when you catch a bunch of Pokemon where do you store them?" Z. didn't need to think long to remember the game's mechanics. "In the PC." "Exactly now isn't that odd consider it in real life terms you have real life creatures made assumedly of flesh and bone and yet you store them in a computer how does that make sense you'd expect a farm or a holding pen but no it's the computer and that too prepares the budding portion of the millennial generation to become cognizant of the linkage between the computer the encyclopedia and the database structure of knowledge in a new era." "So," said Z. "So you're saying Pokemon taught kids how to think in the digital age?"

There's also a deleted character in Modern Cannibals. Well, mostly deleted—he still shows up, unnamed, in a couple of pages. He is Cole Coulter, Z.'s older brother, a popular League of Legends streamer. Before I deleted him, his role was to accompany Mrs. Roddlevan and Frederick in an attempt to bring Z. back home. He had POV scenes that gave insight into the weirdness of his cotravelers, but ultimately, I decided he didn't add anything to the story and removed him almost entirely.

Even then, though, I was already considering the future of Cole Coulter as the protagonist of a story about League of Legends esports. Playing under the ID MadKing, he would be a North American professional top laner, once known for his aggressive duelist style but recently forced into playing boring tanks as the esports metagame became more sophisticated and tactics-based.

The story would be simple, something I envisioned as a "sports story" only about esports instead of regular sports. It would start with Cole's team being relegated from the league, only for Cole to get a last chance signing to a new team with two promising Korean imports. One import, the mid laner, would be a charismatic and eccentric player in the mold of Doinb/Ganked By Mom/Huhi, while the other, an AD carry, would be introverted and pissy and elitist, in the mold of Piglet. The team would initially struggle, cultures would clash, then a mid-season replacement to sign a psychopathic Tyler1/Tarzaned style streamer as jungler would revitalize the team, put them on a major run, and get them to the World Championship. Though they would eventually fall after a miracle run, Cole would get a moment to truly shine on the biggest stage when he won a pivotal game by aggressive split pushing rather than tank play.

Thematically, the story would be about two things. First, a counterpoint to the idea of American exceptionalism, featuring a league where Americans are particularly bad compared to Korean or Chinese players. Second, an exploration of what it means to be exceptional at all. Cole would be an all-around mediocre person. Middling at school, at (real) sports, at the various popularity contests of being a teenager. League of Legends, this niche sub-sport, is the one thing he truly excelled at, the one place where he was good, better than 99.9 percent of all players, and yet even within that statistical greatness he wound up, ultimately, in a professional scene where he was once again mediocre, relegated to "tank duty," to facilitating other players to carry.

What does it mean to be the best? How can someone be so, so good, only to reach a level where they were still nothing special? Is there any way to win if you're not "the man who always wins"?

I remembered that panel from Electric Tale of Pikachu. The last people filtered before the final champion. It's certainly no walk in the zoo!

This idea was pretty detailed for a story I never wound up writing, something I mostly blame on the years 2018 and 2019, when a lot of bad things happened to me and in retrospect I consider it a minor miracle I managed to finish Chicago at all. As a human being, I would be decimated for the next three years, and so a lot of stories I might have written in that time never came to fruition.

Meanwhile, League of Legends esports reached a peak, then the venture capital bubble burst as investors realized there was no monetization scheme in place for any interested party except Riot Games. Money hemorrhaged out, Riot shifted resources to Valorant, and a sport that had been overinflated based on projected exponential growth in perpetuity fell back down to earth.

Also, Players came out.

PLAYERS
FUGITIVE
FUGITIVE
FUGITIVE
FUGITIVE
FUGITIVE

Players was a 2022 mockumentary about a fictional League of Legends team competing in the North American league. Conceptually, it was doing a lot of what I had planned for my story: following a single team on a rags-to-riches run, focusing on the interpersonal drama of the team members, asking questions about greatness and its pursuit. It's a pretty good show if you're familiar with League of Legends esports at all, with a lot of on-the-ground fidelity that gives it an authentic feel, which is exactly what I had been hoping to use my esports fanaticism to accomplish. It completely took the wind out of my sails; it was like my idea had already been done.

So by 2022, the idea of a League of Legends esports story was dead. But there was still a drive to create something with that spirit, that would delve into those themes.

What remained after all these years of sifting the sieve, letting sand slip through, was that one panel from the manga. The number of people pursuing greatness slowly filtering until only one remained. And if I wasn't going to pursue that idea through League of Legends, maybe I could pursue it through another vehicle. Maybe the vehicle through which the idea had originally been exposed to me. Pokémon. It all came back to Pokémon.

V. Everything Evolving Into Crabs

I knew immediately that if I were to write a Pokémon fic, it would be a tournament arc. This was the natural evolution of my esports story idea. Also, if I were to write Pokémon, I wanted it to be a story about utopia, immersed within Pokémon's near-future ideal world, where everything is clean and healthy, where society is neat and ordered.

This idea caused me to remember the novel Eyeless in Gaza by Aldous Huxley, which I had read a few years back. A mostly autobiographical bildungsroman written on the precipice of World War II, the novel ends with the young protagonist on a journey to Central America, where he meets an idealistic doctor who believes sport to be a proper substitution for war. He tells the story of two tribes locked in internecine conflict through generations, able to replace that violence with soccer matches.

And wasn't that what the world of Pokémon was, a utopia revolving around neutralizing weapons of war by using them for competitive sport?

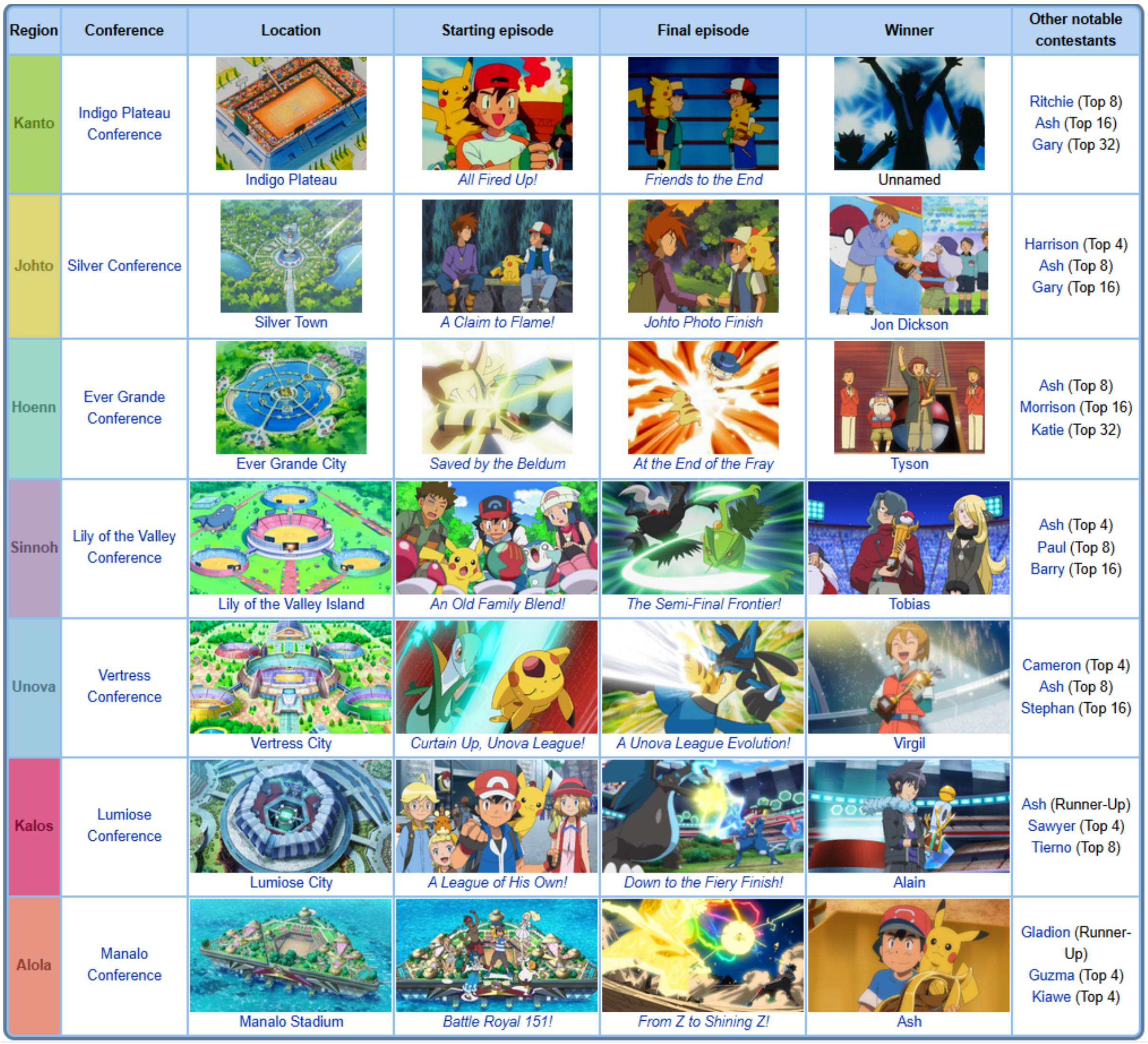
This tournament, I envisioned, would not simply be about deciding who was best, but an ideological battle for the future of the Pokémon world. To that end, I imagined a war between an entrenched trainer class, who competed as philosopher-warriors, intense individuals with deep connections to their Pokémon, and an upstart commercialization that sought to replace the ideological underpinnings that made their society so safe and prosperous with economic accumulation. It was from this kernel that the character who would become Aracely Sosa arose: charismatic, appealing, human-empathic, and propped up by a support staff who did all the hard work of teambuilding for her.

I imagined the story having an ensemble cast, focusing on nearly every competitor equally, with the Aracely character not having any especial focus until her improbable rise to the top. I imagined a final round where she faced off against "the man who always wins," and though she would lose to him, she would seem to have won the ideological battle, altering the course of society as major corporations scrambled to employ her formula for success at a much grander scale. The story would end with this realization of the earth-shattering importance behind her run, only for Aracely to sink in disappointment. Because in the end, all she really wanted was to win.

The more I thought about it, though, the less I liked the idea of an ensemble cast. The ensemble cast element of Chicago hadn't gone over very well (though I like it), and I figured it would wind up inflating the length of the story considerably. I was coming to the end of Cleveland Quixotic, after all, and once more wanted to write something smaller, tighter, and denser.

So I oriented my thinking to instead have the story revolve around Aracely and one major rival, to give an interpersonal mirror to the ideological war being waged. Thus, Toril came about as an antithesis to everything I had imagined Aracely to be: gruff, antisocial, independent. Their rivalry would culminate in a semifinals battle, before Aracely went on to fight "the man who always wins" in the finals.

I forget exactly when the gender theme came into the equation, but it evolved as an outgrowth of (once again) my competitive League of Legends expertise, where women are essentially nonexistent despite there seemingly being no biological blocks against them. This dovetailed nicely with Pokémon, a world where women seemingly could be powerful competitors, but where—in the anime at least—none ever are. For instance, look at this chart of every major tournament in the anime:



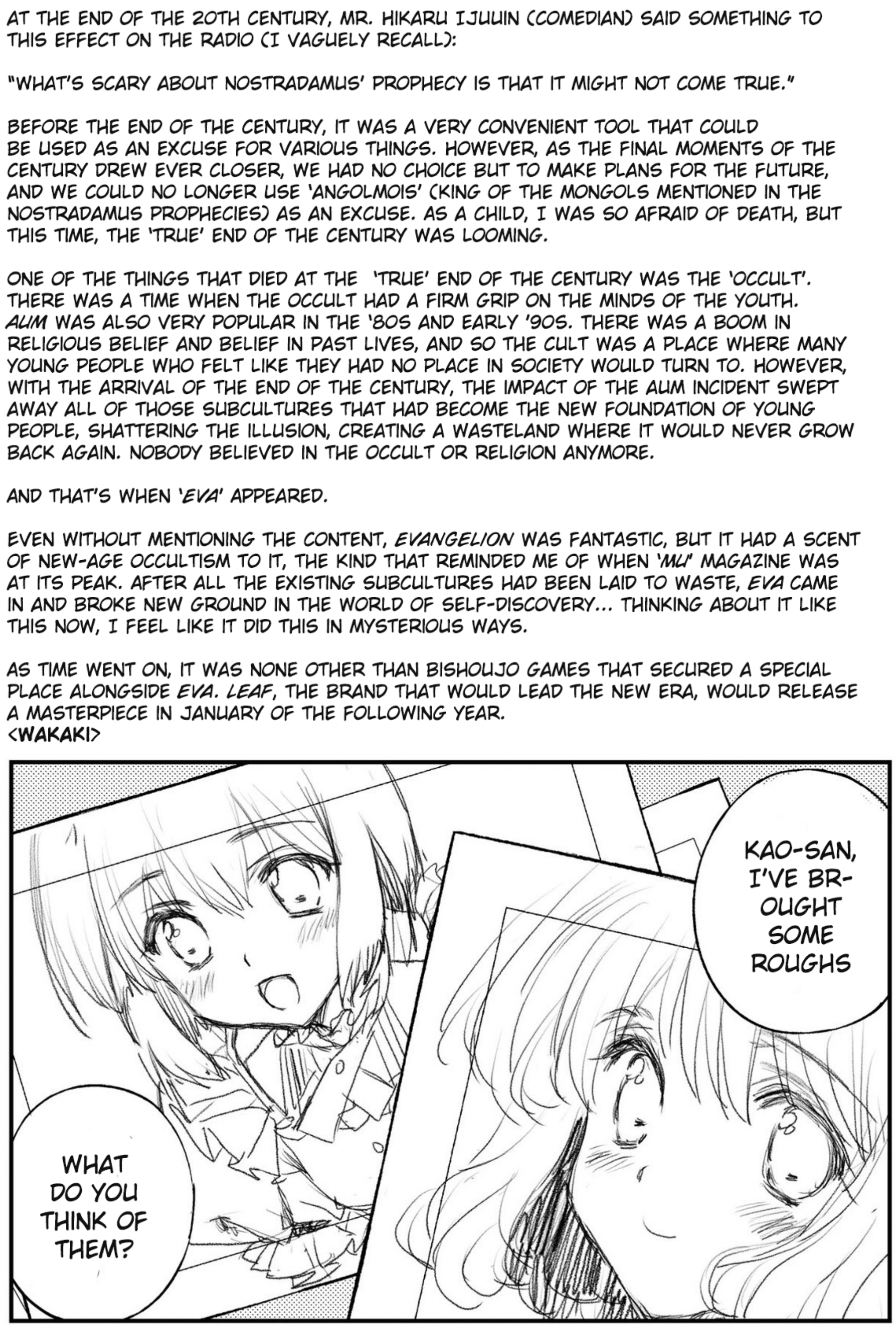
Region	Conference	Location	Starting episode	Final episode	Winner	Other notable contestants
Kanto	Indigo Plateau Conference	Indigo Plateau	*All Fired Up!*	*Friends to the End*	Unnamed	Ritchie (Top 8) Ash (Top 16) Gary (Top 32)
Johto	Silver Conference	Silver Town	*A Claim to Flame!*	*Johto Photo Finish*	Jon Dickson	Harrison (Top 4) Ash (Top 8) Gary (Top 16)
Hoenn	Ever Grande Conference	Ever Grande City	*Saved by the Beldum*	*At the End of the Fray*	Tyson	Ash (Top 8) Morrison (Top 16) Katie (Top 32)
Sinnoh	Lily of the Valley Conference	Lily of the Valley Island	*An Old Family Blend!*	*The Semi-Final Frontier!*	Tobias	Ash (Top 4) Paul (Top 8) Barry (Top 16)
Unova	Vertress Conference	Vertress City	*Curtain Up, Unova League!*	*A Unova League Evolution!*	Virgil	Cameron (Top 4) Ash (Top 8) Stephan (Top 16)
Kalos	Lumiose Conference	Lumiose City	*A League of His Own!*	*Down to the Fiery Finish!*	Alain	Ash (Runner-Up) Sawyer (Top 4) Tierno (Top 8)
Alola	Manalo Conference	Manalo Stadium	*Battle Royal 151!*	*From Z to Shining Z!*	Ash	Gladion (Runner-Up) Guzma (Top 4) Kiawe (Top 4)

Every known winner is male. Every known finalist and semifinalist is male. Only a handful of female characters have reached the quarterfinals. What possible in-universe justification could there be for that?

This question was actually far more prominent in early planning and drafting than it wound up being in the final work. Initially, I had Aracely's personal motivation revolve around a drive to be the first female trainer to win; this would increase the ideological conflict between her and Toril, who attempted to ignore that she was female altogether. Over time, this theme would see diminished importance in face of the last piece of the thematic puzzle: cults.

It came from reading Underground by Haruki Murakami, a nonfiction journalistic account of the 1995 Tokyo sarin gas attacks carried out by the cult Aum Shinrikyo under the direction of its leader Shoko Asahara. Japan in the 90s was experiencing its own End of History, one taken literally by those disaffected with modern society's grand narrative. The prophecies of Nostradamus became fashionable among the young, who believed that 1999 would be the final year before the world was destroyed. Murakami interviewed both survivors of the gas attack and members of Aum Shinrikyo, collecting worldviews of people who simply thought they were "different" and who were willing to give everything in their lives to the one place that seemed to accept that difference.

The 1995 attacks were a watershed moment in Japanese culture. In their wake would come pivotal works of Japanese pop media, like the titan of otaku culture, Neon Genesis Evangelion:



AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY, MR. HIKARU IJUUIN (COMEDIAN) SAID SOMETHING TO THIS EFFECT ON THE RADIO (I VAGUELY RECALL):

"WHAT'S SCARY ABOUT NOSTRADAMUS' PROPHECY IS THAT IT MIGHT NOT COME TRUE."

BEFORE THE END OF THE CENTURY, IT WAS A VERY CONVENIENT TOOL THAT COULD BE USED AS AN EXCUSE FOR VARIOUS THINGS. HOWEVER, AS THE FINAL MOMENTS OF THE CENTURY DREW EVER CLOSER, WE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO MAKE PLANS FOR THE FUTURE, AND WE COULD NO LONGER USE 'ANGOLMOIS' (KING OF THE MONGOLS MENTIONED IN THE NOSTRADAMUS PROPHECIES) AS AN EXCUSE. AS A CHILD, I WAS SO AFRAID OF DEATH, BUT THIS TIME, THE 'TRUE' END OF THE CENTURY WAS LOOMING.

ONE OF THE THINGS THAT DIED AT THE 'TRUE' END OF THE CENTURY WAS THE 'OCCULT'. THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE OCCULT HAD A FIRM GRIP ON THE MINDS OF THE YOUTH. *AUM* WAS ALSO VERY POPULAR IN THE '80S AND EARLY '90S. THERE WAS A BOOM IN RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND BELIEF IN PAST LIVES, AND SO THE CULT WAS A PLACE WHERE MANY YOUNG PEOPLE WHO FELT LIKE THEY HAD NO PLACE IN SOCIETY WOULD TURN TO. HOWEVER, WITH THE ARRIVAL OF THE END OF THE CENTURY, THE IMPACT OF THE AUM INCIDENT SWEPT AWAY ALL OF THOSE SUBCULTURES THAT HAD BECOME THE NEW FOUNDATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE, SHATTERING THE ILLUSION, CREATING A WASTELAND WHERE IT WOULD NEVER GROW BACK AGAIN. NOBODY BELIEVED IN THE OCCULT OR RELIGION ANYMORE.

AND THAT'S WHEN '*EVA*' APPEARED.

EVEN WITHOUT MENTIONING THE CONTENT, *EVANGELION* WAS FANTASTIC, BUT IT HAD A SCENT OF NEW-AGE OCCULTISM TO IT, THE KIND THAT REMINDED ME OF WHEN '*MU*' MAGAZINE WAS AT ITS PEAK. AFTER ALL THE EXISTING SUBCULTURES HAD BEEN LAID TO WASTE, *EVA* CAME IN AND BROKE NEW GROUND IN THE WORLD OF SELF-DISCOVERY... THINKING ABOUT IT LIKE THIS NOW, I FEEL LIKE IT DID THIS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS.

AS TIME WENT ON, IT WAS NONE OTHER THAN BISHOUJO GAMES THAT SECURED A SPECIAL PLACE ALONGSIDE *EVA*. *LEAF*, THE BRAND THAT WOULD LEAD THE NEW ERA, WOULD RELEASE A MASTERPIECE IN JANUARY OF THE FOLLOWING YEAR.
<WAKAKI>

(What's scary about Nostradamus' prophecy is that it might not come true. A year whose chief terror was that THIS WAS IT.)

Pokémon, whose first games released in Japan in 1996, also emerged within this post-Aum world where fixation on the minutiae of pop media was becoming a primary pillar of meaning for the youth, and it's hard not to see echoes of cultism in the evil teams that dot the series' landscape. Even Team Rocket, originally more modeled on organized crime than occultism, veers that direction in Gold and Silver, and afterward the organizations and their world-ending plots become increasingly absurd, to the point where it starts to become unclear why anyone would ever follow, say, Lysandre.

As I mentioned earlier, my personal interest in Pokémon was at odds with these clownish, Saturday morning cartoon villain organizations, but Murakami's account of the Aum attacks recontextualized them for me, made them make sense even within the framework of a "realistic" utopian world. The last elements snapped into place, and I knew my main character would be the member of one of these cults. A cult dedicated to, what else? Evolution. A core element of the Pokémon series, a perfect metaphor for the frustrating lack of movement of the End of History 90s. I imagined a cult leader as a surrogate mother figure for Aracely, who would have a strained relationship with both of her own parents, and deciding on that, the idea of making Pokémon's canon evil mother Lusamine the villain was a no-brainer. I imagined a post-SuMo Lusamine, unable to move on from her experience merged with Nihilego, languishing in Kanto after being sent there to consult with Bill, who had his own experience being merged with a Pokémon... It didn't take long to figure out how all these pieces connected.

The full form of the story had taken shape.

VI. Showdown

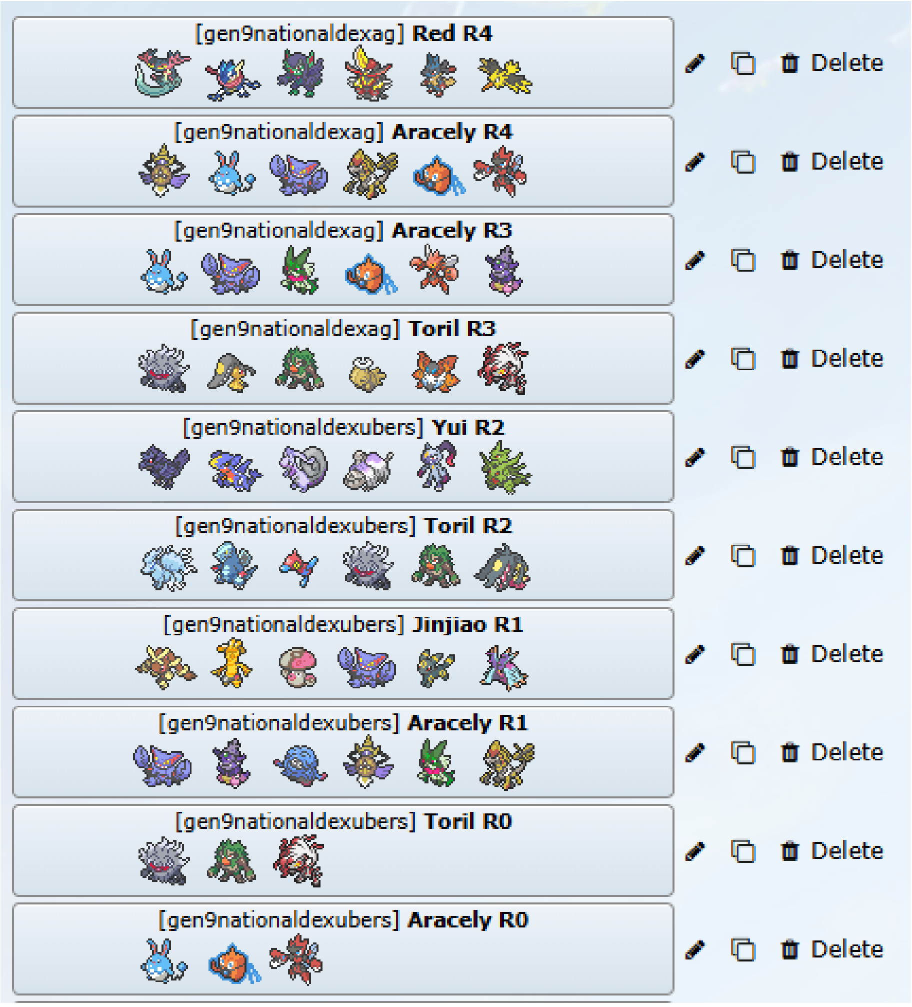
I knew immediately I would be following Showdown rules for the battles. No alternative even crossed my mind. I had dabbled in Showdown a few times over the years, first in Gen 3 OUs, then later in Gen 7 OUs, and I knew from experience that Pokémon is a monumentally more interesting competitive game when operating at a high level compared to either its depiction in the anime (shounen logic, mid-fight evolutions) or the general playing experience (spam your best move on your overleveled starter). I knew I would use competitive rulesets before I even considered the thematic or worldbuilding aspect I would eventually take in the story itself (i.e., that the specific rulesets prevent battles from becoming bloodsport and enforce order on the world). I simply thought doing battles this way would be far more entertaining.

To prepare, I started playing Gen 9 OUs under the guidance of a few friends who were into the competitive scene. I grinded the ladder for months, eventually getting a good enough grasp on the metagame to reach 1500 Elo on the Showdown ladder, which is not very good but generally higher than someone can reach with dumb luck.

Crafting the tournament format and rulesets used in the story wasn't difficult. I modeled the tournament format on the League of Legends World Championship, with region-based seeds (having been selected due to performance in regional tournaments) competing in four groups before the highest performers advanced to a single elimination bracket. Initially, I envisioned a 32-competitor bracket instead of the 16-competitor bracket that would appear in the final draft, but otherwise the format came quickly and easily.

In terms of the rulesets and available Pokémon, my considerations were made primarily in terms of what would be most entertaining to read. I decided to include Mega Evolutions and not include Z Moves, Dynamax, or Terastallization, because Mega Evolutions are cool and those other gimmicks are not. The bring-9-pick-6 format, while unusual in Showdown rulesets, is similar to the rules in Pokémon Stadium and VGC tournaments, and also adds a level of intrigue to which Pokémon each competitor uses. (It also enabled Red's Zapdos at the climax of the story, which was something I knew I would bring out from very early on.)

With the help of one of my friends who knew competitive Pokémon, I scripted out each battle assiduously before I wrote them. Every battle was tested using Showdown itself, with only a few turns mocked up to account for luck. For instance, in Aracely versus Jinjiao, Slowking is meant to stay asleep for three turns. Rather than rely on luck to ensure Slowking actually slept that long during the test, I could give Slowking a useless move and have him use that instead to simulate being asleep.


[gen9nationaldexag] **Red R4**
[gen9nationaldexag] **Aracely R4**
[gen9nationaldexag] **Aracely R3**
[gen9nationaldexag] **Toril R3**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Yui R2**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Toril R2**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Jinjiao R1**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Aracely R1**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Toril R0**
[gen9nationaldexubers] **Aracely R0**

The only thing that couldn't be tested in Showdown was the 7 PP Kingambit trick Red uses at the end of the story, because it's impossible to set a Pokémon to have fewer than max PP in Showdown. This led to one of the bigger mistakes of the story, as it turns out that Encore would simply wear off if Kingambit ran out of PP, rather than forcing him to use Struggle like I assumed. Luckily, even if this were the case, it wouldn't change the outcome of the battle, so it's not an error I lose too much sleep over.

Character teams were chosen to thread the needle between a few considerations. The team needed to be competitively viable, reflect the character's personality in some way, and be distinct from other teams for the sake of variety. (Variety is somewhat unrealistic in real top-level competitive Pokémon, where you'll often see many almost identical teams in the top ranks. But that would be boring.) Some lack of optimization was allowed under the conceit that actually training these Pokémon to peak form would take a lot of time in the real world, compared to Showdown were optimization can be determined quickly due to the ability to immediately adjust stats and builds.

I also tried to give some preference for Pokémon that would be more familiar to layman fans, though this was difficult because Gen 8 and 9 have outrageous power creep and many popular early generation Pokémon have been completely phased out. (Using Megas helped with this issue.) It was this consideration that led to Azumarill being Aracely's ace. There was also an innate challenge to imagining what the competitive scene would look like without legendary Pokémon. Zapdos and Landorus-Therian have been inexorable staples of the competitive scene for generations. What happens in a world where they aren't used at all?

In the original 32-person bracket, I imagined Aracely competing against Jinjiao in the first round, then minor characters Adrian da Cunha and Jacq Ray Johnson in the next two rounds, before facing Toril in semifinals. I imagined Adrian da Cunha as a "hometown hero" whose team wasn't great but he was plucky with a lot of grit, and Jacq Ray Johnson as a self-aware heel who liked to use cheesy strategies and gimmicky Pokémon like Smeargle and Ditto. Condensing from 32 to 16 occurred around the same time I had settled on Lusamine as my villain/cult leader, which led to replacing those two with Gladion. I developed full brackets for both the 32-man and 16-man iterations, with character names and regions, just in case I ever needed to mention them.

All that was left to do was write the story.

VII. Unbroken Line of History

I began writing in September 2023 under the tentative title Unbroken Line of History, which I would later change to simply Lines. In the original drafts, I opened the story with a modified version of the panel from Electric Tale of Pikachu detailing how people are filtered over time in their pursuit of being the best, this time starting with all 8 billion people in the world until only one remains. The story then cut to Aracely's perspective in the restroom as she mentally prepared for her final group stage match.

At this point I was more set on Aracely being the clear protagonist of the story, so she had a few facets of her personality designed around that. First, as I mentioned before, there was a feminist angle where she was motivated specifically to be the first female trainer to win the championship. Secondly, I threw in some more generic nervousness/fear of failure. The other major difference is that I did not lead with the cult prophecy of the world ending. I originally envisioned the cult reveal to be a mid-story twist, and only obliquely hinted at it.

The scene still played out with Toril appearing and the two getting off to a bad start. Then, Cely's father tried to talk strategy with her while she ignored him, before the battle transpired in much the same form as it does in the final draft.

I showed this early draft to my friends and most disliked it. My girlfriend at the time told me Cely sounded like an edgy 13-year-old boy, while my neuroscientist friend whose aspirational idol is Bondrewd from Made in Abyss wanted to know more about the oblique hints of a cult, finding everything else boring. Another friend said it was stupid that there were 30 seconds between turns during the battle and that the Pokémon should just go at each other; nobody would actually want to watch a battle that was paced so slowly. (I vehemently disagreed with that take. Basically every popular sport balances between slow-paced moments of strategy and fast-paced moments of action and execution.) Some people I showed it to did enjoy it, though. Gazemaize, the author of Chili and the Chocolate Factory, was especially enamored by the Brittany/Gardevoir reveal and the Bud Light Analyst Desk, and implored me to keep both of those elements at all costs. 7th, one of my friends who helped me with the Showdown stuff, was so into it she drew fan art of all the characters (which I've posted before) and also wrote eight pornographic short stories about them.

I rewrote the same opening scene several times across October and November, though these were minor iterations without significant adjustments. Frustrated with the lack of progress, I decided to take a break from writing to simply think about the story for a few months.

During this time, to fix Aracely's edgy 13-year-old voice, I decided to lean into her being from Pokémon Los Angeles (with her native region, Visia, being a play on "visual" as a reference to Hollywood) and gave her a Valley Girl accent. To prepare for this, I listened to hours and hours of ASMR videos of people speaking like Valley Girls and took notes on their inflection and syntax. It was here where I decided on Aracely's underlining quirk, as a way of capturing the unique style of emphasis Valley Girls used.

This also made me realize I needed to adjust Aracely's personality. Despite the tone of her voice, she was still acting antisocially. She didn't want to talk to her father, she didn't want to talk to Lachlan Nguyen, she didn't even really want to talk to Toril. Toril herself was a lump of coal. My own misanthropy kept leaking into the characters, even when I conceptually didn't want them to have it. I thought back to Cleveland Quixotic, and how what made the Jay and Viviendre romance work was that they actually both liked each other, and figured—even though I didn't have explicitly romantic plans for Aracely and Toril—that I needed to do something similar to make their rivalry truly pop. Rather than avoid people, Aracely would lean into talking to them, even if they were annoying. Although Toril remained frigid, there would be a part of her yearning for emotional contact, a way to coax her out of her shell.

I also thought deeply about the structure of my stories in general, and my inability to come up with good hooks. It was around this time that someone I knew was reading Chicago. They pointed out that the plot of Chicago doesn't really start until Chapter 26; that I was "burying the lede." I considered this. My logic, when writing Chicago, was that the Empire moving to take over Washington would be a twist, something that would shock and excite people and change their perception of the entire story.

But did that make sense, when really the story was "about" that twist? Didn't that just make everything before the twist harder to get into for a reader? Chicago might look radically different if I revealed the Empire's goals immediately, but it would also probably be a more immediately engaging work. I'm a big fan of delayed gratification in storytelling, but had I taken it too far?

This was a major revelation for me, and immediately I understood what I needed to do for my Pokémon story: move up the cult plotline. Place it front and center. Name the whole story after it even. I decided on framing the opening scene from Toril's perspective, depicting Aracely initially more as an alien other, emphasizing the fact that she was in a cult rather than hide it behind foreshadowing. This could also lead to Aracely and Toril having more of a dual protagonist setup, which would make my planned two-half finale (one half where Aracely battled "the man who always wins," one half where Toril got involved in stopping the cult's doomsday plot) work even better.

Confidence resurged. At the end of January 2024, my girlfriend of seven years and I broke up. A few days later, I started writing the sixth—and ultimately final—draft of When I Win the World Ends.

VIII. When I Win the World Ends

Now it's the part of the Making Of where I actually make the thing I'm supposed to be making, but there's a lot less to say about it. Once I have a plan, the actual writing of the story is the easy part, and most of what I wrote—with a few exceptions—looks similar to the story as it exists now.

There were some oddities. I wrote the first seven chapters (everything up to the end of the Jinjiao battle) and then had to take a two week break to write a short piece for a writing contest I had entered in December as part of an effort to stop overthinking WIW. After this interruption, I returned to WIW writing perhaps a bit more perfunctorily than I usually would, leading to an original version of Chapter 8 (the chapter where MOTHER makes her first real appearance) that was short and abbreviated. Later, in editing, I would rewrite most of this chapter.

A few ideas emerged while writing, like the motif of serendipity/Logos, which I felt tied nicely to the ideas of evolution and history. It was also in this draft that I introduced Cely's friends Haydn and Charlie, as a nod to an earlier work of mine also featuring a fashion-obsessed girl from Los Angeles. (Speaking of nods to earlier works, in the original 32-man bracket, Cole Coulter featured as one of the competitors, but he didn't make the 16-man cut.)

The process went smoothly. I finished the draft at the end of May, a little under four months after I started it. I had envisioned the full story as being about 70,000 words, but the draft ended up closer to 115,000. Underestimating story length is just an essential element of the trade, though.

A few days after finishing the draft I went on a four-day Oklahoma Darkness Retreat where I had access to zero electronics. The goal was to think about my story deeply and how it could be improved in the editing process.

In this time chamber, where I did nothing except complete crossword puzzles and read The Recognitions by William Gaddis, I came to a realization. There was one element the story needed that wasn't already there.

That element was Sabrina. In the original draft, Sabrina was not present during the scene where Aracely meets the Old Man. She was mentioned obliquely a couple of times in conjunction with Aracely's "psychic powers," but it never really built to anything. There was still a scene where Aracely was interrogated due to her relationship with MOTHER, but only by nameless goons, and the scene lacked tension as it was clear Aracely could talk circles around them.

When I returned from Oklahoma, I prepared for my conception of Sabrina as a character by writing an 8,000 word short story from her perspective, which hashed out an entire backstory for her. Then, I started editing the draft.

For me, a lot of editing is just polish. Usually, cutting out needless sentences and fixing clunky ones, as well as emphasizing a few of the more understated themes and motifs. For instance, during editing, I made slight additions to emphasize the thematic connection between Aracely's suicide attempt and the global war that almost destroyed the world, as well as the connection between the moon and cyclical insanity (lunacy, etymologically, being related to the moon). I made the Old Man more of a Walt Disney-esque figure (from my notes: "a dying Disney"), rewriting much of his dialogue to either be direct quotes or to evoke his ideals. I also expanded on several of the scenes where Toril and Aracely interact to make their relationship more complex and nuanced. I gave

MOTHER some new dialogue, including her speech in Chapter 18 about loving a child for the potential it promises, while also paradoxically wanting it to remain a child forever.

The largest changes were in the three chapters I almost fully rewrote. The first was Chapter 8, which as I mentioned earlier was overly terse. In the original draft, it depicted MOTHER as more pathetic, more dependent on Aracely. I decided to make her a more threatening figure, and incorporated a few references to the Moloch sacrifice scene from Valle Verde to make her seem more like a false idol. Similarly, I rewrote Chapter 12, which was originally a very short chapter that focused solely on a conversation between MOTHER and Nilufer that ended with the order to kidnap Aracely. In rewriting the chapter to include Fiorella, I gave myself more opportunity to flesh out the respective philosophies of her and MOTHER (including some of the story's most salient discussions about why cults exist), as well as give more of an insight into the inner workings of RISE as an organization. And lastly, I fully rewrote Chapter 19 to include Sabrina.

The last changes I made in editing were to the final chapter. When I finished the final draft of the story, I sent it to several readers, many of whom had looked at the original drafts of the first chapter, as well as julirites, the author of a Fargo fan fiction called London. There was an immediate and minor backlash to the final chapter, which was originally much more pessimistic, from most people who read it. In the original version, Aracely and Toril were not still in communication. (Fiorella was also dying of cancer instead of jockeying to replace the Old Man.) The finale had a much more somber, sedate, tragic note. Juli and 7th disliked this sad ending, while Gazemaize wanted me to cut the final chapter altogether. I felt confident that the final chapter was necessary, though, and revised it to its current version, which was much better liked.

And then... the story was finished, near the end of July. I crunched the numbers and realized that if I posted two chapters to start and then did a twice-weekly posting schedule, I could end the story serendipitously on October 12. So I did.

IX. Names and Special Thanks

In my Making Of post for Cleveland Quixotic, I had a fairly extensive list of where I got all the character and place names from. The list is a lot less extensive here; most names I constructed for the purpose of sounding evocative, rather than taking them from someplace specific. For instance, I chose the name Aracely Sosa because it sounds like whistling with its repeated S sounds, compared to Toril Lund which is a lot harsher with its consonants. You can see a similar rationale behind names like Fiorella Fiorina, Yui Matsui, and even some of the background characters, like Jacq Ray Johnson, Jr., where there is a lot of emphasis on alliteration and rhyme.

There are a couple of exceptions. Jinjiao is the in-game ID of a longtime Chinese League of Legends pro of middling notability. He picked the name (which means "Golden Horn") as a reference to the Golden Horned King, a villain from Journey to the West.

Lutz, Fiorella's cameraman, was named after an extremely minor character from Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance, who is not playable and only appears in a singular cutscene before being killed. They are so irrelevant that despite naming a character after them, I actually forgot their name, which is Lotz, not Lutz.

Haydn is named after the famous classical composer.

Special thanks to 7th and Elick320 for helping me with the teams and battles. Thanks to Gazemaize and julirites, among others unnamed, for reading and providing feedback. And thank you all for enjoying the story.

Chapter 7: Death and Identity in Post-postmodern Mystery

This essay contains spoilers for the entirety of Umineko When They Cry and spoilers for up to Chapter 140 of The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere.

Near the end of the first half of Umineko When They Cry, a bizarre curveball is tossed into the logic duel between Battler and Beatrice. Beatrice claims that Battler is somehow not actually Battler, but rather an imposter, a body double brought to the island as part of a plot to seize the inheritance. Thus, Battler is unqualified to be her opponent, meaning he must be expelled from the metafictional realm where the game takes place, and the game itself must be cancelled.

Battler, stumped by her logic, cannot form a rebuttal. He disappears, his very existence denied. "Without the one pillar that established his soul," the story reads, "he had fallen into the very depths of darkness, and had been drifting about all this time."

In The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere, a parallel moment occurs at the climax of the story's first half. The protagonist, Utsushikome of Fusai, confronts the person she believes to be the murderer, someone she knew when she was young. Cornered, he attempts to appeal to their childhood friendship, indicating he had even been in love with her. Utsushikome of Fusai cuts him off coldly, saying:

"I'm not Utsushikome of Fusai."

She then bludgeons him to death with a blunt instrument, committing a murder for which the reader immediately and unambiguously knows the culprit.

Identity is the fundamental question of even the most basic mystery novel. What is the identity of the culprit? Which character, seemingly a functional member of society, is actually a murderous villain?

As the genre has developed in complexity, this question has only become more prominent. Red herrings designed to throw off genre-savvy readers necessitate many non-culprits to also lead double lives or conceal key components of their identities. Inverted mysteries, where the culprit is revealed to the reader right away, emphasize the duality of the culprit's public persona and their murderous secret: Columbo's villains are exclusively elite, wealthy, and cultured, and Light Yagami is the seeming portrait of a model Japanese youth. Even House MD, a mystery story where "diseases are the suspects," predicates its drama on the fact that the diseased *victim* is concealing a double identity; in House's words, "Everyone lies."

Meanwhile, the mystery genre blurs the line between art and game. A proper mystery, as genre purists will tell you, must be solvable, must be fair, must follow certain "rules." If the culprit turns out to be a character who had not appeared in the story prior to their reveal, then the parameters of the game were broken, the reader had no chance. Ditto for the implementation of fanciful poisons or contraptions, secret twins, hidden passages, and so forth. These rules are in service of preserving the phenomenological experience of reading a mystery; like a game, the value of the work is expressed through the reader's attempts to interpret it, rather than its existence as a static artistic monument.

Yet, the genre has long been entangled with literary art. Mystery's foundation lies with authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins, placing it as an outgrowth of the romantic and realist literary epochs. But between 1880 and 1930—the peak of literature as mass market entertainment, before film slowly usurped it—from when Sherlock Holmes popularized the genre until the so-called Golden Age of Detective Fiction, mystery became its "own thing," and in being its "own thing" suddenly resisted the artistic spirit of its time, whatever that time might be. The Golden Age coincides temporally with the height of modernist fiction, and yet none of the stream of consciousness or abstraction that defines the latter seeps into the former whatsoever. In the post-WWII postmodern era, when literature increasingly rejected the concept of objective truth altogether, detective fiction (both in literature and in new, televised forms) continued to doggedly assert the objective truth of the culprit's identity, the objective solvability of the crime.

A lot of this discrepancy has to do with the general schism between "art" and "entertainment" that arose in literature between the late 1800s and early 1900s. As the modernists ventured in more experimental directions, a newly literate and growing middle class continued to clamor for works that were more relatable to their pragmatic, dollars-and-cents sensibilities. (I often talk about "modernism" and "postmodernism" as these all-encompassing artistic zeitgeists, but the truth is that literary realism has never fallen out of vogue with mass audiences, and even in the 1920s a realist social satirist like Sinclair Lewis—not to mention twenty names you've never heard of writing at a similar bent—sold more than Hemingway and Faulkner combined.)

By entrenching itself within the "entertainment" sphere, and by continually defining itself against itself (the process by which "genre" is created), mystery fiction was able to develop independently of the overall artistic milieu and maintain a faith in objective reality even as that became an increasingly untenable position elsewhere. And it's what makes post-postmodern mystery fiction like Umineko and The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere so fascinating to me.

Umineko didn't emerge in a vacuum. It extends from Japan's dedicated mystery subculture, and I've heard that it shares many similarities with The Decagon House Murders, a 1987 novel by Yukito Ayatsuji. Japan has its own unique relationship with postmodernism as a literary movement, with it being more of a clearly-defined artistic fad that reached prominence in the 1980s specifically, compared to the West where postmodernism seems to be the nightmare of a post-WWII world from which we cannot awaken. I wish I had more familiarity with the Japanese mystery subculture to more authoritatively speak on this subject, but I do know that it, like the West, still believes strongly in the solvability of its mysteries. I described Japan as having a "postmodern" mystery scene, but that's not what Japan calls it. In Japan, the term for a solvable, "fair play" mystery is honkaku, meaning "orthodox"—or, roughly equivalent, "classical." And beginning with The Decagon House Murders, Japanese mystery entered a new era, shin-honkaku—neoclassical.

These terms are a perfect fit. In the West, the classical is associated with the Renaissance, and indicates a focus on mathematical precision in service of the objective truth associated with God. (The golden ratio, after all, is called divina proportione in Italian—divine proportion.) The precise, solvable logic of a classical murder mystery fits within this framework, and the neoclassical mystery retains its core beliefs, much as how Napoleon Bonaparte wielded neoclassicism to lend divine legitimacy to his rule. Despite the increased complexity and metatextuality of shin-honkaku mysteries, there remains that belief in objective truth.

Umineko does not believe in objective truth.

Umineko, as a mystery, is fucking bullshit. Solving it relies on so many unspoken metafictional conceits, and even if you do "solve" it, it turns out that the culprit of the first half of the story isn't even the """real""" culprit, because the first half of the story was actually just in-universe murdersona fanfic and the actual """"""truth"""""" of what happened on the island is completely irrelevant to most of the mysteries with which the reader is presented.

And that's under the assumption that Umineko actually tells you who the """""""""real""""""""" culprit is, because it doesn't, unless you read the manga, where it was thrown in as a bone to an absolutely incensed fanbase. Umineko was not popular with the Japanese mystery crowd, which makes sense, because they get pretty directly and brutally lampooned. This is a story where a detective quoting Hercule Poirot gets introduced halfway into the story and is an unequivocal villain (she calls herself an "intellectual rapist"), with the heroes fighting to *conceal* the truth from her.

No, Umineko does not believe in objective truth. It might believe it exists, in some abstract way, but it does not believe it matters, compared to the magic of subjective reality. About 90 percent of Umineko (honestly a lowball estimate) depicts stuff that didn't really happen. Sometimes it depicts stuff that didn't really happen within the subjective reality of a fanfic that itself didn't really happen. Even most flashbacks set before the mystery or flash forwards set after are mired in unreality.

No, what Umineko believes in is emotional truth, subjective truth. The story's key phrase is "Without love it cannot be seen," referring to how biases (love) influence one's understanding of reality. The "Red Truth," objectively correct statements, are depicted as painful and punishing, or spiderwebs that ensnare helpless victims. It is in the space between what is known objectively where magic is allowed to exist, where interpretation can supersede fact, and where true emotional catharsis can be reached.

As such, it is the antithesis to the mystery genre.

It's also the antithesis of postmodernism. Not rejecting it, in an impossible attempt to return to some pre-modern understanding of the world; no, Umineko agrees with postmodern thought on the subjectivity of our reality. Where it diverges is in the interpretation of that subjectivity, seeing in it not the cynical nihilism postmodernism quickly (perhaps from the onset) devolved into, but a new method of reaching emotional and intellectual fulfillment.

This, to me, is what the post-postmodern artistic zeitgeist has increasingly turned toward. Works that recognize the information-dense, ungraspable reality of the post-internet age, but seek and ultimately find emotional catharsis within it. Everything Everywhere All at Once, Spider-verse and unlimited lesser multiverse stories, Homestuck, even the origin point of the literary mode Infinite Jest all operate within this theme.

Where Umineko seeks its catharsis is in identity. While the central "game" of the mystery, sometimes literalized as a chess match between Battler and Beatrice, initially appears to be Battler's attempt to discern the true culprit in classical mystery fashion, from Beatrice's perspective the game is an attempt to assert and confirm the existence of her identity altogether.

In "reality," Beatrice the Golden Witch "does not exist." There is no magical being haunting the island. Beatrice is an identity invented by another character in an attempt to generate meaning for their life. And that meaning is, fundamentally, important, perhaps more important than the objective facts that deny her existence. Which is why, as the story continues, Battler switches to Beatrice's side and defends her existence from a slate of cackling ghouls dredged out of the annals of classical mystery, who sling the "rules" of classical mystery about like weapons to maim and kill. Objectivity is the enemy, the Red Truth is a prison, but it cannot cover everything and in the mercy of subjective reality, a different sort of "truth" can be allowed to live. As the story goes on, it becomes increasingly clear that this "truth" is everything. Umineko never explicitly reveals the true killer on Rokkenjima, though mostly only through technicality. That's fine. Even by technicality, subjectivity can be allowed to live. Beatrice's identity remains.

Return to that moment I described at the start of this essay, where Beatrice briefly denies Battler's identity. In the overall narrative of Umineko, it winds up being an almost entirely inconsequential scene. Shortly after Battler disappears, his sister Ange asserts that even if Battler was not born to Asumu, he is still Kinzo's grandson, meaning he is a true heir to the Ushiromiya family and thus qualified to be Beatrice's opponent. Battler returns and the status quo is swiftly reestablished.

What is the purpose of this scene, then? In character, it makes sense as a play for Beatrice to make. Her own identity has been constantly under assault from Battler, most recently—and most painfully, for her—when Battler forgot an important promise he once made to her. She is giving him his own medicine as revenge. But it's a very dramatic and extreme turn for something so petty. The scene does establish that Battler was not actually born to the woman he believed to be his mother (Asumu), but what does this mean for the story itself?

Beatrice's claim stems from a convoluted baby swapping plot that is revealed much later in Umineko. It turns out that Rudolf had a child with both Asumu and his mistress Kyrie at the same time, and Asumu's child, the "real" Battler, died immediately, so Kyrie's child was renamed Battler and substituted for the real thing. Both children were Rudolf's son, and thus Kinzo's grandson, and all of this really has nothing to do with anything else going on in Umineko's mystery, and is kind of pointless. (It does suggest Battler as a red herring identity for the mysterious baby Kinzo tries to foist onto Natsuhi in Umineko's fifth episode, but as far as red herrings go, it's a lot of legwork for not much deception.)

I've always been fascinated, though, by what it would mean if Beatrice's claim were true. Not just that Battler wasn't Asumu's son, but that he was not related to the Ushiromiya family at all. There's some fairly compelling evidence in its favor. It's stated early on that Battler, at age 12, became angry when his father married Kyrie shortly after Asumu's death, and estranged himself from the family for six years. His appearance at the family conference where most of Umineko takes place is the first time anyone in the family has seen him since, and almost everyone is surprised by the physical transformation Battler has undergone, particularly remarking on how incredibly tall he is. Near the end of Umineko, when it is suggested that Rudolf and Kyrie are the mystery's "true" culprits, the idea that they brought in some yakuza thug to pose as Battler and help them murder everyone becomes compelling.

But that's just the practical aspect of the mystery. What about the story itself? What would it mean for the ultimate moment of emotional catharsis at the end of the narrative, when Ange—dying of cancer—finally reunites with her long lost brother, only to discover he isn't actually her brother at all?

Well, that's actually what happens at the end of Umineko. Not because Battler is a yakuza thug, though. It's because of yet another oddly-inserted plot element where Battler receives brain damage escaping the island and develops a dissociative identity disorder that causes him to view himself as Tohya Hachijo, an amnesiac author.

Though somewhat farfetched, this last-second development makes sense within Umineko's thematic framework, where identity—and the capacity for people to inhabit multiple identities at once, either literally or through the subjective interpretations of the people around them—is one of the key drivers of the story's emotional core. For Ange, her brother is lost, and yet meeting Tohya is a moment of intense catharsis, because she is willing to believe in the redemptive magic of love and "see" a subjective truth more powerful than objective reality. After all, this meeting occurs in the "Treat" ending, and is placed in contrast to the "Trick" ending, where Ange instead embraces objective rationalism and deals with uncertainty by gunning down anyone who might possibly be a threat to her. (Which turns out to be every character in her immediate vicinity.)

I wonder how that Treat ending catharsis would read, though, if instead of the author Tohya Hachijo, who deals with his identity disorder by writing fictional accounts of the Rokkenjima massacre that, while not the literal truth, reach for a subjective or emotional truth, the version of her brother Ange met was Battler the yakuza thug, who was never her brother but a cheap imposter. It would probably undermine Umineko's entire message. It would at the very least make the Treat ending seem like a nasty trick in its own right. Or would Ange still be able to "see" an emotional truth even in this? Where does the line between subjective reality and pathetic delusion lie? What, exactly, would be the identity of the brain-damaged man she reunites with? What is the identity of the story's protagonist?

That's where The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere comes in. When its central mystery starts, a metafictional interlude occurs in which rules for solving the murder(s) are established. The first rule reads:

1. THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PROTAGONIST IS ALWAYS TRUTHFUL

This rule, like many of the subsequent rules, is highly questionable. The story has already thrown into doubt who exactly the "protagonist" is. That seems like an odd thing to say, because the very first chapter, numbered 000, appears to make it explicitly clear:

> "Understand this: Your role in the scenario has been elevated from that of bystander to that of the heroine, and your victory condition is thus," she continued. "You must ascertain the identity of your opponent, the cause of the bloodshed to follow, and prevent it before it comes to pass. In order to accomplish this goal, you must pay close heed to all which transpires, and use deduction, alongside your skills and past experience of the events to follow. Do you understand your role?" "Yes," I said, muted.

The issue is that whoever the perspective character is in 000, they are not the same person as the perspective character for the rest of the story. It eventually becomes clear that they share the same body, that they are both called Utsushikome of Fusai. Nonetheless, they are distinct identities. They have different memories, different motives, and different personalities. Much later, they even hold a conversation with one another in the same metafictional realm where the mystery's rules were outlined, a metafictional realm that turns out to not be metafictional at all.

Of course, neither of these Utsushikome of Fusais are actually Utsushikome of Fusai. They are gestalt personalities that combine the memories and personality of an original Utsushikome of Fusai with the memories and personality of an entirely different girl named Kuroka, and then after the two Utsushikome of Fusais diverged from one another for reasons that are, as of writing, not fully clear but potentially due to the accumulation of memory over a centuries-long time loop. This labyrinth of identity defines the story as much as its core mystery. As said mystery hurtles toward its climax, scenes in the present are intercut with flashbacks detailing how the current identity of Utsushikome of Fusai came to be. In the present mystery, there is no ultimate reveal of the culprit (one is proposed, but in fairly faulty fashion). In the past, though, the reveal of the truth of Utsushikome's identity is laid bare, brutally and explicitly, to the point that it consumes the main narrative, and culminates in the scene I described at the beginning of this essay, where the gestalt entity inhabiting Utsushikome's body discards her identity as Utsushikome and performs a brutal on-screen murder.

In doing so, the traditional climax of the mystery novel—the unmasking of the culprit—is reframed. It is the protagonist, not the culprit, who is "unmasked." Flower is, ostensibly, a time loop murder mystery (though only one loop is shown), and shortly after committing this murder, Utsushikome meets another character, who tells her that in 90 percent of loops, Utsushikome herself is the murderer. It's a claim that seems unbelievable, despite what just happened, based on the reader's knowledge of Utsushikome as a bumbling and indecisive girl who needed the most extreme circumstances to rouse herself to violence (an "anxious waif," as the author, Lurina, described her to me). It's a claim even Utsushikome meets with doubt. At the same time, how much does the reader really know about this character? How much does she know about herself? Throughout the story, her name is split into various nicknames: Utsu, Su, Shiko, each tied to a different part of her existence. The fragmentation of her name symbolizes the fragmentation of her psyche, and the version of her the reader follows—the ostensible "protagonist"—is Su, the smallest and most fragmentary scrap of her, the one most divorced from knowledge and understanding.

If Umineko exhibited faith in the magic of subjective interpretation, Flower provides a cynical counterpoint. Forget comprehending other people, or the confusion of your increasingly complex world. What if you cannot even comprehend yourself? What if, rather than the redemptive turn of Umineko's Treat ending, one looked inward and saw only greater incomprehensibility? In Beatrice, Umineko has its own character whose psyche fragmented into various constituent personalities, each with their own name and appearance. Yet Umineko posits a beauty in these personalities, and its protagonists fight for their right to exist in the face of crushing objective reality. For Utsushikome, her fragmented selves are base, ominous, potentially murderers, or indeed actually murderers—as even Su considers herself the murderer of the original Utsushikome. Her primary goal, more important to her than solving the mystery, is finding a way to undo the gestalt fusion that underlies her personality and restoring the original Utsushikome. Beatrice fights to justify her existence; Su fights to destroy it.

Postmodernism's focus on the subjectivity of individual experience quickly turned it toward cynicism, even nihilism, and the all-pervading "irony" that David Foster Wallace made his personal bugbear. One can only know their own experience of the world, not anyone else's, and the outside world is becoming increasingly complex, increasingly unfathomable, increasingly disorderly. Post-postmodernism was, from its inception, a deliberate turn away from that cynicism. A way of finding emotional catharsis even after logic dissolved. Umineko operates within this framework, while Flower goes in the opposite direction. The postmodernists were too optimistic. They at least believed in subjective truth. In the world of The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere, even that strip of reality is shredded.

Entropy features big in the postmodern landscape, brought to literary prominence by Thomas Pynchon, who studied engineering physics and often used mathematical motifs as analogies for social concepts. Flower, too, engages with the concept of entropy, or rather revolves around it. The central murder mystery is set at the sanctuary of an order of scientists dedicated to curing death, and the way they have sought to do so involves stealing a piece of an entropic god-entity and incarnating it in human form.

As such, Flower strongly ties the concept of death to the concept of entropy. I said before that identity is the fundamental question of even the most basic mystery novel, but the same could be said for death; you'd have to go back to The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins, or maybe mystery stories made for children, to find a mystery without murder. Van Dine's rules for mystery put it emphatically:

> There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder. After all, the reader's trouble and expenditure of energy must be rewarded.

I love this because it's such a cavalier treatment of death in narrative, as though death, rather than a tragedy, was simply a way to kickstart a plot—or a "reward" for the "expenditure of energy" (as though a reader's energy is finite, and always being entropically lost). Indeed, many of the Golden Age detectives who found themselves amid a new murder a month seemed to take a similarly detached tack toward the whole affair. Umineko lampoons this as well; its Hercule Poirot parody, when faced with a group of people playing dead, goes on a six-man mass decapitation spree just to ensure there really is a mystery to solve.

Flower philosophically confronts the question of death as early as Chapter 002, when fan favorite smarmy bitch Kamrusepa goads Su into an argument over the moral implications of curing death. Kamrusepa takes a rationalist, "anti-deathist" perspective, stating that not only is curing death a fundamentally good thing to do, but the most good thing that can be done; that curing death would not only be valuable in and of itself, but would also lead to the alleviation of every other social ill. Su is less sure. Certainly, a deathless world wouldn't be free of social strife. But there's also another argument she flirts with: Perhaps people, like Van Dine's readership, somehow need death to orient the meaning of their lives around.

Her thought process mirrors that of the mystery genre. If the genre has absolute faith in objective truth, it also has absolute faith in utter destruction. Crimes less than the complete annihilation of a thinking being will not suffice. In such a way, even the most orthodox or classical mysteries themselves have a drop of the postmodern in them, a faith in the incontrovertible necessity of entropic dissolution, though in the form of the human body rather than society or information. It's notable to me that, in contrast, Umineko posits a sort of immortality for its victims, alive in the "Golden Land" within the Treat ending despite the objective reality of their tragic deaths, or even alive within the metafictional conceit of the Rokkenjima game board, where if the players desire they can always open up the box, set the pieces aright, a play with these characters once more. Through its use of the time loop, Flower rejects this proposal; its characters are trapped in a game without end, and ultimately conspire to escape this hellish immortality they've wrought for themselves. (Remember also that Utsushikome's role as protagonist, explicated in 000, was not to solve a murder, but to *prevent* it, which she fails at utterly and quickly.)

The Flower That Blooms Nowhere is still ongoing, and many of its mysteries remain unresolved simply due to that fact. I've spoken extensively to the author, Lurina, and she assures me she is committed to the solvability of the mystery, which suggests that she intends to ultimately reveal the truths behind the murders and everything else. This essay isn't intended to be predictive of the story's future (which, as of the latest updates, is heading into some of the most exciting territory yet, with many meditations on death and identity that I would love to talk about in this essay but withheld because I know many readers aren't caught up), but rather an assessment of what currently stands. What I find most fascinating about Flower is how it rejects so many of the redemptive post-postmodern precepts that imbue Umineko, despite borrowing so much of its metatextual complexity, and without retreating into the classical or even postmodern, as would seem to be the only alternative. Instead, Flower's vivisection of identity and death within post-postmodern concepts strike me as a wholly new and unique artistic direction, and once more makes me excited for the growing avant garde to be found within web fiction.

Chapter 8: Chainsaw Man (anime)

Neon Genesis Evangelion invites viewers to think about it. Its plot is tangled and complex; it draws on religious iconography that gestures toward deeper symbolism; and its tone is weighty, self-serious, and ponderous. None of this is to say that Evangelion actually *has* deeper meaning (it becomes increasingly clear, for instance, how much of its kabbalah references are purely aesthetic table dressing), but it certainly wants you to ask yourself what it means.

Chainsaw Man, by contrast, is aggressively irreverent. Its main character Denji is a superhuman doofus; he and arch-doofette Power bingus brother about in a Beavis & Butthead routine that undercuts any pretensions toward seriousness the supporting cast might scrounge. Rather than oblique references to Judaic mysticism, Chainsaw Man draws its iconography from popular films; the OP directly remakes shots from such classics as Big Lebowski, Pulp Fiction, Attack of the Killer Tomatoes, and The Grudge vs. The Ring. Even the title "Chainsaw Man" is bluntly brainless, and the anime ends with a climactic battle between Chainsaw Man and Katana Man, except Katana Man's katanas look more like machetes, fulfilling the Sadako vs. Kayako horror crossover promise of the OP via Leatherface vs. Jason Voorhees.

It's a show that is very easy to watch, go "Yeah that was fun," and have nothing more substantial to say. In many ways, the show invites that reading.

It does have a few things going on under the hood, though. The first is how despite its irreverent tone it often cleaves tightly to plot beats I've seen in other shounen shows. Kobeni is a useless crybaby, but in a fight turns into an unstoppable badass; I saw this in Demon Slayer. A bunch of fodder characters are introduced, developed, and then summarily executed to give the impression "anyone can die" (the core cast has all survived); I saw this in Attack on Titan. The main character is too weak, so he gets trained by an eccentric mentor who kicks his ass until he gets stronger; I saw this too many times to list. Denji's Beavisness is itself only an intensification of the Monkey D. Luffy template for shounen protagonist, a well-meaning dipshit who takes ridiculous joy in simple creature comforts like stuffing his face with food. In a way, by overtly asking the viewer not to think about things too deeply, Chainsaw Man is defending itself from the realization that little of what it is doing is particularly unique. That it is, at its core, a series of recreated shots stitched together from pop cultural sources.

It works, though. I thoroughly enjoyed all of those regurgitated elements I mentioned before, even the fake-anyone-can-die shtick that annoyed me to no end when Attack on Titan did it. The brain-off style encourages the viewer to engage with the story at the level of an earnest and excitable child, the kind of person who would think someone called "Chainsaw Man" is super cool and not lame at all. It's fascinating, because there's an element to the story's willingness to undercut itself that is reminiscent of the Joss Whedon-style snarkery that has rendered the MCU unwatchable. Someone giving their serious backstory only for Denji to go "HNNNGGH? That's dumb!" is pretty similar to Loki's big villain monologue being interrupted by the Hulk. How much of Chainsaw Man's effectiveness is simply because it's hitting the exact right note at this moment in time, the way Avengers did in 2012 (when I finish my rewatch of Sword Art Online I'll have a lot to say about the year 2012), attuned to the exact right frequency of irony, before years go by and that frequency becomes passe, out-of-tune? It feels inexplicable now, but people really thought "Puny god" was an amazing joke back in the day. Now it's hollow and lifeless. Is Chainsaw Man doomed to the same fate, after a decade of imitators bite it to pieces? (And there *are* imitators; I'm currently watching last season's big anime, Dandadan, which takes a lot of tonal cues from CSM.)

I can't see the future, but Chainsaw Man has a bit of narrative bite of its own to sustain itself. There's a thematic throughline about the sacrifices people make to attain their goals. Denji is introduced as literally selling off parts of his body for money in pursuit of pathetically unambitious goals like "eating bread with jam"; later, most members of Public Safety are shown to have made contracts with devils in which they also literally give up body parts in exchange for the goal-fulfilling power. Like Denji from that first episode, though, the members of Public Safety are in a form of slavery they have no hope of escaping. Their sacrifices are noble gestures, but ultimately useless. In one scene, Aki uses a cursed sword that steals his lifespan to kill Katana Man, only for Katana Man, being functionally immortal, to stand up seconds later. Likewise, Himeno gives the Ghost Devil all of her body to save Aki, killing herself; the Ghost Devil is immediately devoured by the Snake Devil moments later, failing to do what Himeno wanted. (It's then revealed that all Himeno had to do to save Aki was pull the string on Denji's body.)

It is that sense of futile nobility that Chainsaw Man skewers most stringently, both in its text and its tone. Aki and even the devils taunt Denji for his lack of ambition, framing themselves as superior because they pursue something loftier than him. Yet Denji, of course, always prevails; even against Aki, he responds to the taunt by kicking him in the balls. Aki claims that only people with strong ambitions can survive in Public Safety, but the story proves him wrong at every turn. It's Denji and Power, in their brainless contentedness with basic pleasures in life, who survive battle after battle unscathed. They are both immortal (or "near immortal," as Power is described), as though they are simply too stupid to die. Even among the human characters, the only one who crawls out of the show unscathed is Kobeni, who seems to have no ambitions of her own beyond survival; she was forced into Public Safety by her family to pay her brother's college tuition.

At first glance, this makes the message of Chainsaw Man seem clear: "Ask for too much, and you'll simply be destroyed." This message perfectly matches the story's irreverence. If you wanted a deep and thoughtful story, too bad, you're getting a guy with a chainsaw for a head cutting up zombies. It's bread with jam, and the story wants to make sure you enjoy it.

But there's more at play here. Denji is unstoppable, sure. He lives while his colleagues die or get maimed. At the same time, he's trapped in the same web as the rest of them, Makima's web, and his simple ambitions only make him trivial for her to manipulate. At the end of the day, Makima is the only one who is getting what she wants, who controls everything. I once had a dream about Makima that accurately spoiled her role in the story, so even though I've only seen the anime I have an inkling of what's to come. I only wonder, narratively, how it'll play into the ideas about ambition introduced in this opening arc.

Then, there's the scene where Kishibe first starts training Denji and Power. In an endless graveyard of all the Public Safety employees who have died, he asks them what their ambitions are, why they fight. They give characteristically low-minded answers, and Kishibe chokes with emotion. "You're perfect," he says. "I love you." He hugs them, then snaps their necks as the first part of his training regimen.

Weeks later, speaking to Makima, Kishibe explains. He thought he could look at Denji and Power as toys. Meaningless, silly, able to be sacrificed. Not like the hundreds, thousands of dead Public Safety employees he's buried, who had real dreams with emotional weight. Only, after weeks of training, he's finding that even they can't truly be seen as toys, that something about them is growing on him.

I read this scene as a metaphor for Chainsaw Man's irreverence as a whole, for the purpose of ironic detachment in art. In the MCU, characters give undermining quips to avoid emotionally interfacing with the art. It's the ethos of "comic relief" in general. Relief; as though seriousness is too much to handle without some silly joke to take the weight off. Denji and Power are toys (there's something toyetic in the idea of Chainsaw Man himself), comic relief, an excuse to not become emotionally invested, Beavis & Butthead who go "HNNNGGH? That's dumb!" whenever things get serious.

But, in Chainsaw Man at least, the seriousness is still there, under the surface. There is a field of graves, there are people sacrificing themselves for no reason, there is a whole ecosystem of serious men and women in salaryman suits and ties being thrown into the meat grinder. (It's interesting that the characters who survive unharmed -- Denji, Power, even Kobeni when she goes badass mode -- forgo the black blazer of the Public Safety uniform and wear only the white shirt that gives them a younger, more student-like look, as though it is a metaphorical childhood that protects them, whereas the more formal black-suited members are consigned to an adult oblivion. I wonder if Makima's dogshit fit means anything in this dichotomy.) The irreverence is not a full reprieve. It doesn't make the emotional elements go away, and as the show goes on, more and more time is spent in the perspectives of characters like Aki, until Denji starts to feel like an alien element in his own story, the piece that doesn't fit correctly into the established emotional framework.

Additionally, Denji starts to notice sociopathic traits in himself, like when he ponders Himeno's death and finds it made no impact on him at all. This element only appeared near the very end of the show, so I don't know how it develops across the rest of the story, but on its own it suggests the downside of ironic detachment, an inability to feel emotion even when emotion is warranted. That was David Foster Wallace's bugbear with postmodernism; that it was too insincere, too distant, capable only of metatextual flippancy, and that there was a need for a "New Sincerity," a post-irony, a post-postmodernism. Chainsaw Man is, like so many works that are popular today, post-postmodern. What fascinates me about it is how it manages that not by abandoning irony and irreverence, but by embracing it even more totally. Or is that a necessary component of post-postmodernism, distinguishing it from simple pre-modernism? You can't simply forget the genre savviness that makes you see a story as a series of tropes rather than an emotional whole. The challenge in the post-postmodern landscape thus becomes to make a story work emotionally in spite of, or perhaps because of, that detachment.

I'd also be remiss if I didn't at least mention the animation. The show looks amazing. Anime has finally gotten adept at using 3D by blending it with 2D, the way the best live action films blend practical effects with CGI. Even beyond that, there's an excessiveness and indulgence to the show; every single episode has a fully unique ED, some of which are among the best EDs I've ever seen. What studio did this?

...Oh. I guess it was natural to make a show about adults sacrificing their bodies in pursuit of impossible goals when 300+ animators made that exact same sacrifice for the benefit of MAPPAkima.

Chapter 9: Dandadan (anime)

In my review of the Chainsaw Man anime mentioned that Dandadan, which I was still watching at the time, seemed to borrow tonal cues from Chainsaw Man's irreverence. The main point of comparison, and what caused me to make that claim, is the emphasis both works have on the literal and figurative emasculation of their protagonists. Not only do CSM's Denji and DDD's Ken lose part or all of their penises, they are both surrounded by forceful, controlling, or outright aggressive female figures who propel the plot.

And could there be a more irreverent take on shounen, a genre literally called "Boy," than emasculation, the elimination of its maleness? Both shows may cleave to certain shounen tropes to the letter (especially in their fight scenes), but in this way they set themselves apart. It's certainly a far cry from, say, My Hero Academia, where female characters are relegated to minor supportive roles.

In Dandandan, the purpose of this emasculated hero is much more clear. DDD uses a familiar nerd-to-coolguy storyline for its protagonist. He begins friendless, isolated, defined by his nerd hobbies. As a symbolic representation of his situation, he not only loses his penis, but his name; Momo, the female lead, refuses to call him "Ken Takakura" due to it also being the name of her favorite actor/celebrity crush, and refers to him instead as "Okarun," a play on "occult," which his otaku interest centers around. The real-life Ken Takakura was known as a stoic, tough, and thus stereotypically masculine figure, the opposite of DDD's Ken Takakura; the suggestion of the narrative arc is that Okarun will gradually develop into a character more deserving of the name, at which point Momo will call him by it. Then he'll also get his balls back.

The emasculated hero also stands in foil to the Serpo, the all-male alien race who serve as the show's recurring villains, and who are the only other male characters in the show until its last couple of episodes. The Serpo are, like the hero, depicted as emasculated, with high-pitched effeminate voices and a lack of sexual organs. Also like the hero, they're depicted as nerds, wearing stiff tucked-in white shirts buttoned up to the neck and spouting sci-fi technobabble. The difference is that they cannot "evolve," as they claim. This is explained as a byproduct of their reliance on cloning for reproduction (and is the reason why they want to harvest human sexual organs), but symbolically suggests a state of perpetual manchildness, the otaku who never develops or grows, compared to Ken, who does. Meanwhile, for lack of a better word, the Serpo are rapey. An involuntarily celibate failure state of otaku-ness, and by the implication of the foil what Ken must work to avoid. After all, the Serpo also have no penises. They have replaced them with whirring phallic probes, a literally weaponized masculinity. They introduce themselves to Momo as simply wanting to be friends, before revealing their nefarious sexual ulterior motives; this contrasts Ken who first sees Momo legitimately as a friend before he even begins to develop romantic feelings for her.

It's in Dandandan's simple, unified clarity of purpose that I find my comparison to Chainsaw Man to be ultimately flawed. As it goes on, this simplicity starts to make DDD saccharine, treacly. The same dramatic loop is wrung again and again: Ken or Momo say something mean to one another, or lie, or make a mistake, then they mentally kick themselves over it ("I was such a jerk!"), and lastly give an earnest apology for their behavior. This happens countless times, sometimes rooted around the flimsiest, most obnoxious of misunderstandings. The show pulls the same bullshit as Parasyte (another nerd-to-coolguy story!) where Girl A sees Boy A touching Girl B, and assumes that means Boy A is being unfaithful, but really Girl B was being forcefully sexually aggressive and Boy A didn't like it and was trying to get away, but Girl A doesn't know this, and it becomes this whole big thing despite nobody (except Girl B, morality's sacrificial lamb) actually having done anything wrong. I hate "misunderstanding" plots like this. They're complete contrivances for the sake of drama.

But that's more-or-less the level DDD is operating at. There's a part near the end, when the show's only other human male character shows up. He's Momo's childhood friend, he has a rapport with her, and even though it's clear to the audience Momo has no romantic interest in him, Ken gets jealous, which the audience knows because he stews over it in class while the teacher lectures about the word "jealousy." It's facile. If Chainsaw Man invited the audience to turn its brain off, DDD is doing something much more annoying by inviting its audience to turn its brain down to the level of a 10-year-old.

Meanwhile, the supporting cast doesn't have much going on. Momo is ostensibly at least a deuteragonist and is in some ways framed as the main character, and while she is certainly active in the story and its battles, she is also a much flatter character than Ken. The basic conceit of the show seems to be what happens when an otaku meets a gyaru, with the indication that this unlikely combination will somehow improve them both, but the onus for improvement is placed entirely on Ken, other than a few instances where Momo says something mean and then immediately apologizes for it. She is introduced as getting romantically involved with a series of dirtbag guys who she mistook as masculine ideals due to their superficial similarities to the actor Ken Takakura; but the moment she meets the character Ken Takakura, she ceases to have any romantic interest in anyone else and is essentially waiting around for the character Ken to develop into something akin to the actor Ken. She's quite patient about it, too.

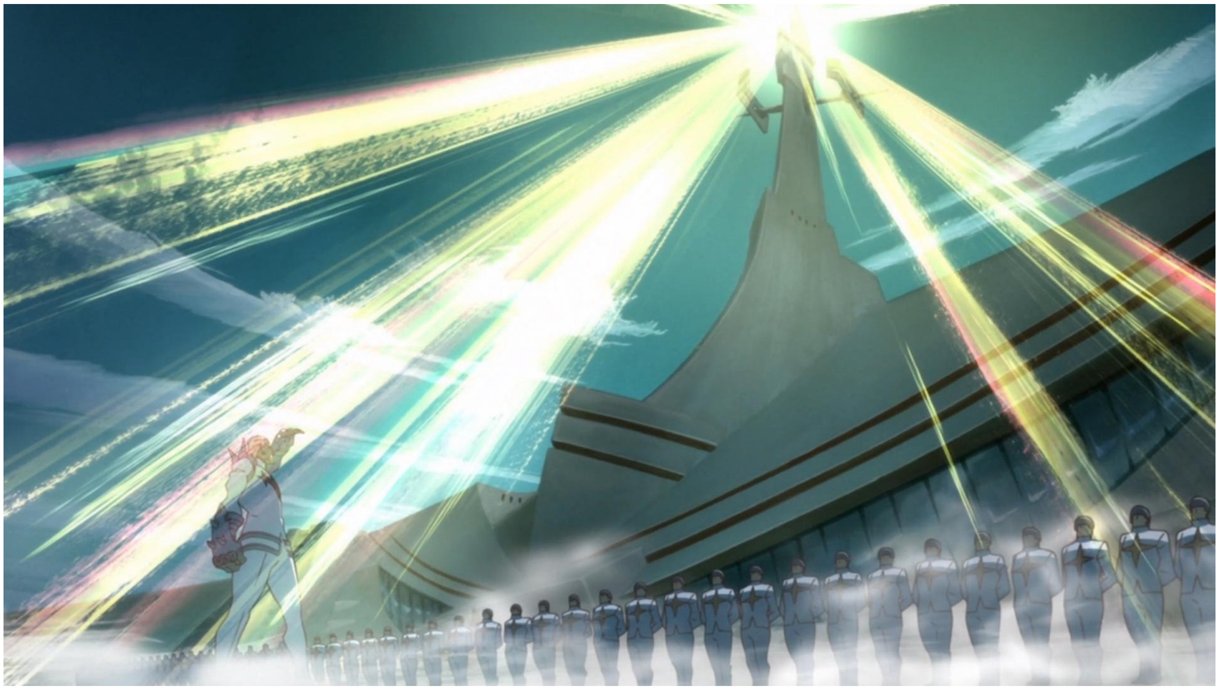
Momo is not defined by her gyaru-ness the way Ken is defined by his otaku-ness. There isn't a suggestion, say, that she is stereotypically superficial or vain, the way Ken is stereotypically awkward and monomaniacal. (In fact, the show introduces Aira as superficial and vain, which only makes Momo look more put-together by contrast.) She is, at most, prone to emotional outbursts, which can always be papered over by an "I'm sorry." She even has her own friends! There are significantly lower emotional stakes in her relationship with Ken compared to Ken's relationship with her.

Because of this, while Ken is emasculated by the story, he is also centered within it, core to its foundation. This is in contrast to CSM's Denji, who increasingly comes across as a minor part of his own show, a pawn in the schemes of others who is emotionally divorced from the consequences of anything that happens. It creates a narrative that is doing one thing and devoting all of its energy to that one thing, but it doesn't give the show much breadth, or much to think about. Ultimately, where forcing myself to think more deeply about Chainsaw Man improved the experience and led me to some insights I otherwise wouldn't have made, thinking about Dandadan didn't lead to a similar result. It doesn't help that Dandadan's story is far more episodic than Chainsaw Man's, rarely compounding upon itself. This episodic nature is emphasized by how the studio didn't even bother to end the season at a logical place, instead cutting its current episodic arc right down the middle.

Lastly, I suppose I should mention that, like Chainsaw Man, this show looks amazing. The production values are all excellent, especially the OP. It feels like any flavor-of-the-month anime is going to look great, but I am currently trudging my way through a rewatch of Sword Art Online, and it's staggering how cheap that show looks, how it cuts corners at every conceivable opportunity. Can't take "looking good" for granted in this racket.

[Post Note: Moments before I posted this, I learned that Yukinobu Tatsu, the author of Dandadan, was an assistant to Fujimoto on Chainsaw Man, so there's possibly a lot more to the comparison between the two series than I realized. Also, on Tatsu's Japanese Wikipedia page, he is quoted as admiring the film Sadako vs. Kayako, which appeared in the Chainsaw Man OP. Sadako vs. Kayako might just be the key to all of this...]

Chapter 10: Kill la Kill (anime)



So, twelve years on, did Trigger save anime?

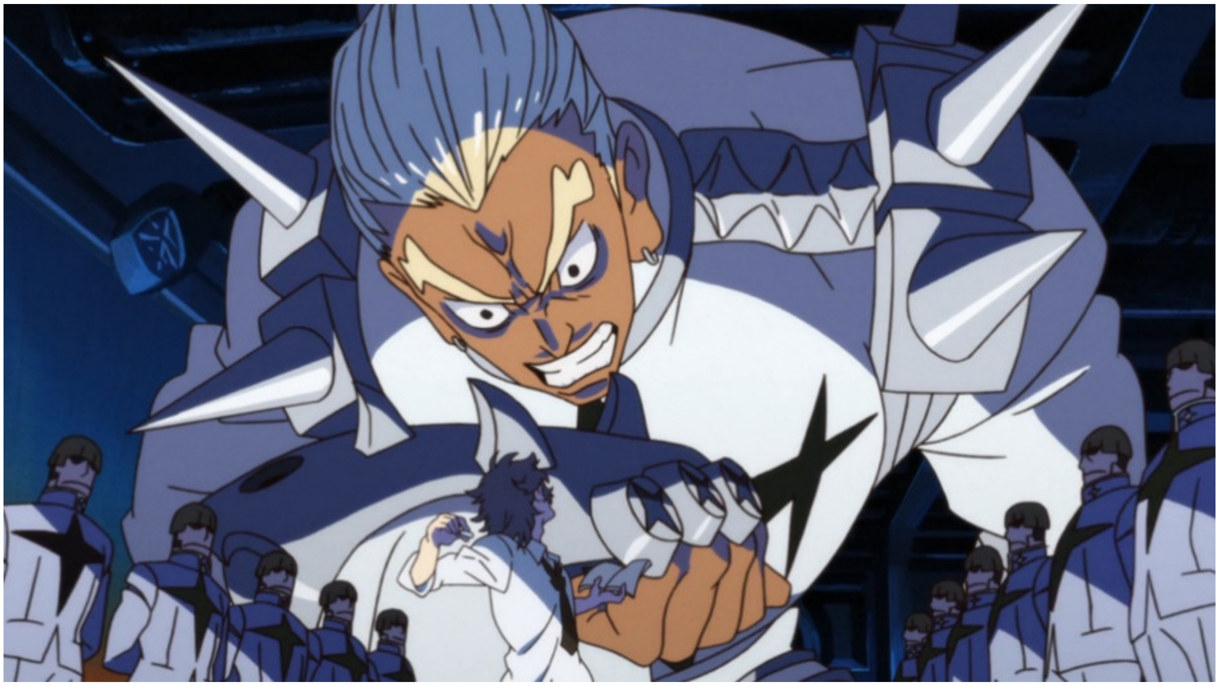
Existing in the present will invariably inundate one with lifeless, disposable, trend-chasing pop media, no matter the medium. Not only do moneymen like to imitate whatever made money before, but artists like to imitate the art they enjoy. The current moment will always seem bloated by dreck, while the past, filtered via the sieve of time, will always seem to contain only gleamingly original works of greatness. Were the 1980s not a golden age of blockbuster cinema, with Aliens and Indiana Jones and Ghostbusters? Please ignore the 1,000 shoddy E.T. knockoffs, thank you, or the million formulaic action hero flicks aping the Schwarzenegger formula.

Anime in 2013, when Kill la Kill began airing, was no different. The past two years had seen Puella Magi Madoka Magica, Hunter x Hunter, Fate/Zero, Stein's;Gate, Kuroko no Basket, Nichijou, Nisemonogatari, Psycho-Pass, and Attack on Titan, all popular and well-regarded shows both when they released and today. So the memetic idea in the anime community that Trigger was "saving anime" with Kill la Kill is patently ridiculous. (If you don't believe how widespread this idea was, two of the three top reviews for the show on MyAnimeList, written the same day the show finished airing, allude to it.)

It's easy to see how the idea became so popular, though. Trigger was a brand new studio formed primarily by staff from debt-stricken Gainax, the legendary studio that in 1995 revolutionized anime with Neon Genesis Evangelion. Eva's main creative figure, auteur director Hideaki Anno, wasn't with Trigger, but many of the people behind Gainax's other popular shows like Gurren Lagann and Panty & Stocking were, so the studio had a new-look fresh-start feel while drawing on a proven lineage of success.

At the same time, Kill la Kill itself promotes its revolutionary nature. Its plot revolves around a lone rulebreaking badass taking on an entrenched system defined explicitly by its aesthetic uniformity. It's not a difficult leap to read this storyline metaphorically, Trigger battling the waves of copy-paste seasonal anime.

However, what is most striking, most obviously eye-catching and unique about Kill la Kill, what hits the viewer with the immediate sense that this show is something different, something new, something like nothing you have seen before, is that it *looks* like nothing you have seen before. Kill la Kill is brimming with unique and memorable *images*, from the gigantic red block text used to introduce every new character and concept, to the bizarre ship-like architecture of Honnouji Academy, to the blend of fluid sakuga with choppy PowerPoint animation for comedic effect, to smaller iconic moments like Satsuki clicking her heel. It's always in-your-face about it, too. The opening scene sets the tone when a dry history lecture gets interrupted by Gamagoori squeezing through a door like a behemoth, utterly ignoring any rules regarding on-model consistency.



It's this devotion to the unique image that sets Kill la Kill apart from most of the other 2011-2013 shows I listed previously, shows that, while they might have a consistent aesthetic sensibility (such as Stein's;Gate's washed-outness or Fate/Zero's glimmering post-processing effects), are often conforming at their core to ideas of what anime "should" look like in terms of character design, setting, and animation. (The two Shaft shows I listed are an exception, but by this point Shaft's Akiyuki Shinbo had been doing his idiosyncratic visual style for over a decade, and wasn't exactly a fresh face.) Trigger's staff previously created Panty & Stocking, a show imitating the look and feel of western cartoons; Kill la Kill advances that idea into a wholly unique fusion of western and Japanese animation traditions, allowing it to break free of the insular anime landscape and its expected visual signifiers.

Obviously the counterpoint lurking beneath this preamble is that, under the unique visuals and tone, Kill la Kill isn't all that innovative at all, even painfully standard at times. Battles are decided by the power of friendship or the power of staying true to oneself (Don't Lose Your Way!), the hero is mind controlled and her friends call out to her until she breaks free, the one-dimensionally evil villain has a big end-the-world plot that everyone teams up to defeat. Even within the parameters the story establishes for itself, Ryuko proceeds linearly, starting out by fighting small fry club captains, then the Elite Four student council, then Satsuki the student council president, and finally Satsuki's mother who owns the school, with only a few speed bumps along the way.

But Kill la Kill makes the argument that aesthetics are too intimately interwoven with content to be disentangled that way. It's the crux of the conceit of the show, which is founded on a series of puns. "Fascism" sounds like "fashion," so in the world of Kill la Kill those concepts are now entwined. "School uniform" ("seifuku") and "conquest" ("seifuku") are homophones, so uniforms are the method by which Satsuki exerts her intra-Japanese imperialism. (Early on, Satsuki delivers a monologue in which she remarks on how Japanese school uniforms are aesthetically modeled on military uniforms, making it natural for her to militarize her school.) The title is itself a tripartite pun, combining words for "kill," "cut," and "wear." (Notably, this is a pun that blends the English and Japanese *languages*, much like the blended animation style.) Despite the visual, slapstick nature of Kill la Kill's humor, puns abound throughout. Some are obvious even in translation, such as the "Naturals Election" used to choose the new student council, while others can be difficult to catch. Nui, for instance, apes Dio Brando's catchphrase of "muda, muda, muda" (useless, useless, useless); later, when her arms are cut off, she screams "ude, ude, ude" (arms, arms, arms).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlRyb2wQ1BY

The core idea of most of these puns is that superficial similarity indicates similarity of content. Sometimes, this is an insightful observation, such as with the pun between fashion and fascism. Fascism is notoriously difficult to define rigidly in relation to other forms of dictatorship, but what *is* easy to define about it is its aesthetics, to the point that films like Star Wars are able to use aesthetic signifiers of fascism to define the politics of its villains even when withholding any actual explanation of those politics. Star Wars never has to show what the day-to-day rule of the Empire is like, because its army *looks* like the Nazis, so the audience gets the idea. Fascism as a political ideology and fascism as an aesthetic are, effectively, the same thing.

And if aesthetics are equivalent to meaning, then doesn't that mean that Kill la Kill looking new in fact makes it new? That its plot, generic in dry summary, is elevated by the distinctive way it's depicted? One pun, delivered upon the revelation that parasitic alien clothes have influenced humanity's evolution for the purpose of harvesting them for food (a story beat itself derivative of Puella Magi Madoka Magica), is that "the clothes make the mankind." The common refrain of Satsuki and Ragyo that people are "pigs in human clothing" hammers the point home: Aesthetics are everything. There is no meaning without aesthetics, just as people without clothes are unevolved animals.

Ultimately, though, Kill la Kill rejects this statement. Clothes are the enemy, literally, and the heroic organization fighting against them is Nudist Beach, whose members fight naked. At the end of the show, all clothes are destroyed, and the final image before the credits is of the entire cast in a giant, naked, triumphant huddle, an assertion of the inherent value of humanity even without aesthetic adornment. Isn't that the point behind all those power-of-friendship, power-of-believing-in-yourself speeches that Ryuko, Mako, and Senketsu use to turn the tables and win the battle? An appeal to a hidden inner nature that one must remain true to (Don't Lose Your Way!!!), that can overpower superficial displays of strength? Ryuko's mind control arc depicts this idea most overtly. She is controlled by having clothes sewn to her skin -- having an aesthetic forced onto her -- but Mako manages to dive into Ryuko's inner world to bring her back to her "true self."

This kind of undermines Kill la Kill as a work, though. What does a "nudist" Kill la Kill look like, stripped of its unique visual language? Certainly not something that would stand out from the waves of high school battle shounen that have been a fixture in the anime landscape since time immemorial. Kill la Kill's thesis might assert that there's a reason these power-of-friendship cliches endure (a sort of, if you'll allow me to become a parody of myself for a moment, post-postmodern reclamation of a narrative mode tarnished by irony and cynicism), but it contradicts the unique visual style that Kill la Kill developed to convey that idea.

In some ways, Kill la Kill does strip down to a nude, or at least semi-nude, state by the end. Many of its earlier concepts, including the connection between fashion and fascism, vanish as the story progresses. Satsuki and her fascist system are revealed to have been a deception while she secretly worked to betray her mother (playing on Ragyo's mistaken belief that aesthetics mean everything by Satsuki *looking* compliant while not actually being so), and once the twist occurs, the entire fascism plotline goes out the window. It's never really mentioned again; even when Ryuko gets on Satsuki's case for her past misdeeds, she only calls her out for "Looking down on people from on high," a general and ideologically-agnostic call against elitism. The 1-episode OVA set after the series briefly touches on the fascist system Satsuki enforced, with the episode's villain accusing Satsuki and the Elite Four of generating real, actual terror and abuse despite their ultimately pure motives (an assertion, once more, that aesthetics mean everything, that looking fascist makes you fascist no matter your true beliefs), but Mako quickly dismisses the claim with another power-of-friendship speech. Satsuki and the Elite Four have grown as people, she says. They're no longer bad like they used to be!

Kill la Kill also gets stripped down tonally by its end. The show's opening scene depicts a disobedient student being whipped, seemingly to death; later, his nude corpse(?) is displayed over the school gates. Combined with the title "Kill la Kill," it sets a dark, violent tone that lends weight to the otherwise cartoonish animation style. By the end, though, this dark tone is revealed as a false aesthetic; there is remarkably little killing in Kill la Kill. Stripped of real narrative stakes, the climactic battles diminish to flashy lightshows, action figures bouncing against each other. Worst of all, the blend of "fluid sakuga with choppy PowerPoint animation" I mentioned earlier increasingly tilts toward the latter. This is largely due to the prominence of Nui as an antagonist, since her cartoonishness is part of her character, but given Gainax's track record of running out of money and/or time by the end of its shows and phoning in parts of them, I wonder whether the habit transferred over to Trigger.

In short, as Kill la Kill strips down, it becomes a weaker show. In doing so, it not only undermines its own theme, but undermines itself as a truly new and innovative work, exposing its reliance on superficial aesthetic. The notion that Trigger "saved anime" would depend not only on Kill la Kill's individual success, but on its influence; twelve years out, and the only other notable shows like Kill la Kill were also made by Trigger. Perhaps you can see some influence on Masaaki Yuasa, who also blends high-quality sakuga with deliberately cheaper animation for comedic or stylistic effect, but he had already established himself in 2010 with Tatami Galaxy. Another show with a distinctive "Trigger" feel, Flip Flappers, was a flop flopper that caused its studio to immediately pivot to generic seasonal stuff.

My friend Lurina, when I asked her whether Trigger really had any influence over the larger anime landscape, suggested that Trigger sparked a general desire for more high-quality animation, which can be seen today in shows like Chainsaw Man or Dandandan. I would counter that those shows, while well-made, lack the distinctive blend of high and low, east and west that defines Trigger; if anything, the notion of the high-quality seasonal shounen adaptation comes from My Hero Academia, where Bones eschewed the traditional 500-episode weekly low-effort adaptation style of Naruto, Bleach, and One Piece and set the blueprint for shows like Demon Slayer, Jujutsu Kaisen, and so on, which adapt their source material in 12-episode chunks with lavish production values.

At the same time, I question whether Trigger even saved itself. Kill la Kill would be the studio's peak, and much of its subsequent output is a pale shadow of the show. (Its only other megahit, Darling in the Franxx, had an even more disastrous ending.) This culminated in BNA, a show that takes Kill la Kill's themes and iconography but does them cheaply and lazily. Since then, Trigger has rebounded -- but not by being "Trigger." Cyberpunk Edgerunners and Dungeon Meshi were both popular and well-regarded shows, but they were adaptations where Trigger had minimal control over the storytelling or aesthetic; Dungeon Meshi, other than a few sparse sakuga moments, doesn't even look distinctively like a Trigger show. It feels like any competent studio could have turned Dungeon Meshi into a hit. Trigger still exists, and in its partnership with Netflix is possibly stronger than ever, but it is losing its unique identity, becoming more standard, more similar to the crowd. Another conformer. Maybe the upcoming Panty & Stocking sequel can turn it around, but who can say.

Either way, Kill la Kill's moment has passed, without the cataclysmic ripple on the anime industry fans at the time expected or craved. Honestly, though, despite how I opened this essay, I can't blame them for their desire to see anime "saved." After all, the biggest anime of 2012, the year before Kill la Kill aired, *did* cause a cataclysmic ripple, one undoubtedly felt to this day. Unlike Kill la Kill, the biggest anime of 2012 spawned countless imitators, an endless flood of imitators, imitators that have themselves spawned imitators and imitators of imitators. That anime of 2012 has even extended its reach past anime, coating the current webfic scene; one could say that the site RoyalRoad would not exist if not for it. In face of such an oppressive, daunting influence, perhaps those fans of 2013 were right to clamor for something, anything, that would reveal a new direction, a way out. In such a context, one might even see it as tragic that Kill la Kill failed to deliver, that at the last moment it came up short. If Kill la Kill was the fork in the road leading to sunnier pastures, this anime led the industry into a deep, dark forest.

The name of that anime?

Sword Art Online.

Chapter 11: Sword Art Online (anime)

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Sword Art Online is a Frankenstein monster. Here is every episode of the first arc and how it was adapted:

- Episode 1 is from the original web novel, published in 2002.
- Episode 2 is from a more detailed rewrite of the story, Sword Art Online Progressive, published in 2012 (only a few months before the anime aired).
- Episode 3 is from the second volume of the light novel, published in 2009.
- Episode 4 is from a side story published shortly after the original web novel, in either 2002 or 2003.
- Episodes 5 and 6 combine a side story published in 2007 and another side story from the eighth volume of the light novel, published in 2011.
- Episode 7 is from a side story published shortly after the original web novel, likely in 2003.
- Episodes 8, 9, and 10 are from the original web novel, published in 2002.
- Episode 11 and 12 are from a side story published in 2003.
- Episodes 13 and 14 are from the original web novel, published in 2002.

By stitching together stories written across an entire decade, often with wildly different purposes and goals, the anime is tonally erratic, with glaring plot and character inconsistencies. For example, Episode 3 is a tragic episode in which Kirito brings several low-level players to a high-level floor, leading to their deaths. Kirito is traumatized; he later explains that this incident is why he plays as a solo player, so nobody else will ever get hurt because of him. Episode 4, by contrast, is a lighthearted episode in which Kirito—having learned nothing, because this story was written six years before the previous one—brings a low-level player to a high-level floor as bait for dangerous player-killers. When the low-level player is comedically groped by a tentacle monster and cries out for Kirito to save her, Kirito only shrugs and says, "Come on, it's not that powerful." He's ultimately correct, and this time the player survives, but what happened to his trauma?

These inconsistencies, combined with Sword Art Online's massive popularity, made it the favorite target of the fledgling anime video essay community circa 2014 to 2017. Though it's possible to do a longform video poring over every single plot hole for almost anything, Sword Art Online made it easy; half of its "plot" was never intended to be arranged in this way, and even when there was intent, it was the intent of an amateur author writing their first-ever story. You couldn't generate a work more perfect for endless nitpicking and angry rants in a lab.

But if the show is blatantly incompetent, what made it so popular?

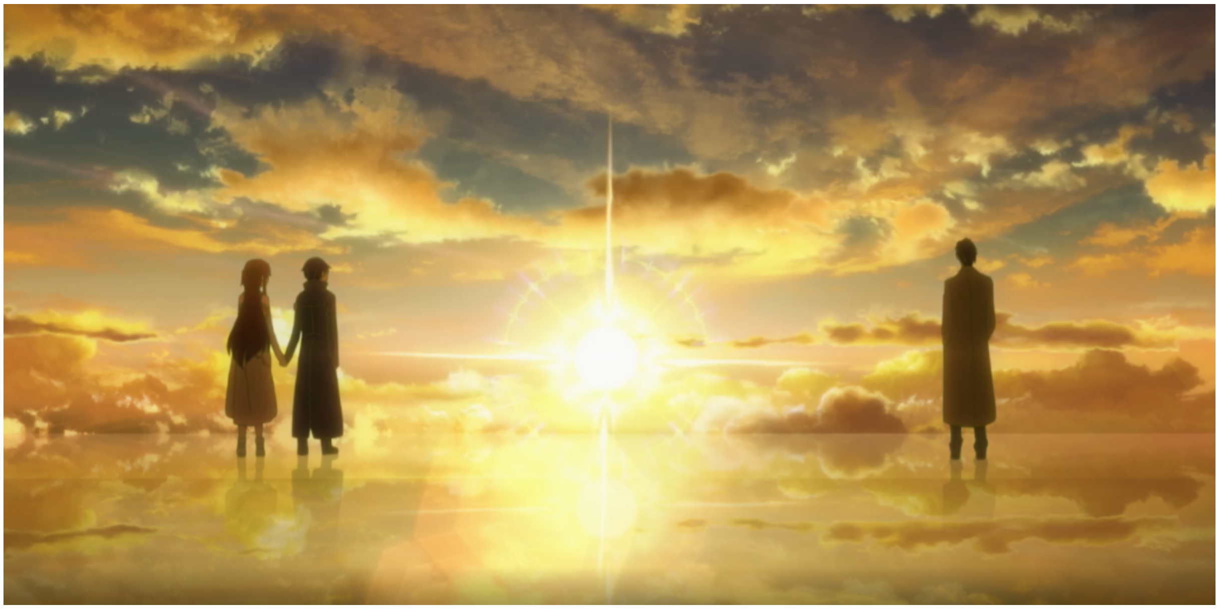
It's tempting to ascribe its popularity to "right place, right time." By 2012, the year Sword Art Online came out, the internet had changed the primary way people interacted socially. Rather than being bound by family, proximity, race, creed, religion, or so on, people grouped together by hobby. "Gamer" was now a community-binding identity, an attribute that distinguished a person and their niche online space from the othered outside. And the Gamers craved legitimacy. They craved the approval and recognition of mainstream culture. They craved representation, that feeling of seeing yourself reflected in the world around you.

The world refused them. The mood of the entrenched pop cultural elite was best encapsulated by Roger Ebert, famous film critic, who had been waging a years-long crusade against video games as an artistic medium. In 2005, in response to the live-action Doom movie, Ebert said, "Video games represent a loss of those precious hours we have available to make ourselves more cultured, civilized[,] and empathetic." He reiterated this claim in statements and essays in 2006 and 2010, and in March 2012, on the eve of Sword Art Online's airing, described Dark Souls—Dark Souls!—as a "soul-deadening experience." "Video games can never be art," he asserted plainly later that year.

In this milieu, it makes sense why Gamers glommed onto Sword Art Online. If nothing else, Sword Art Online takes video games seriously, more seriously than any non-video game media before it (asterisk; excepting .hack). This seriousness manifests in a consistent theme, a singular perpetually present thread that lingers even as plot, character, and tone skew wildly, stated by Kirito to Klein in Episode 1:

"This may be a virtual world, but I feel more alive here than I do in the real world."

This statement defines Asuna, who stops seeing her time trapped in the game as years stolen from her life, and instead learns to live each moment as if it were truly real. It defines Silica, mourning her dead Neopet and willing to risk her actual life to revive it. It defines Lisbeth, hurtling a million miles into the air but still for a moment enraptured by the beauty of a digital sun shining over a digital land. It defines Griselda, murdered by her husband Grimlock for motives he can only confusingly explain as related to how she "changed" in the game, how she became more confident, more self-realized, while he sank into despair (he was not a Gamer. He lacked the Gamer spirit). It defines Yui, the sentient NPC whom Kirito and Asuna adopt as part of a pantomimed marriage that the show's nauseatingly boring second arc is about protecting against an outside world that does not acknowledge it. And it defines Akihiko Kayaba, the game's creator, who when confronted at the end over why he trapped 10,000 people in this death game, can only say that he no longer remembers, before rhapsodizing about the "castle in the sky" he so achingly desired to bring to life. Unstated is that, to make it truly alive, he needed to make it—and the people inside it—capable of death. This logic is twisted, even more bizarre than Grimlock's murder confession, but neither the scene's wistfully poignant tone nor Kirito's responses reject it.



As the video essayists have done, it's pathetically easy to pick apart Kayaba's rationale. But to mire oneself in the story's logic is a mistake; Sword Art Online is not a story guided by logic. What matters is that Kayaba's illogical words are consistent with the ethos that underlies the narrative: The virtual world is as important as, or even more important than, the real world.

The anime's production values reflect this ethos, too. Sword Art Online looks strikingly cheap for its level of popularity. In almost every fight, still images with blur lines vibrate in tacky simulation of animation. There is no dynamism in the camerawork, and sword duels are often depicted in shot-reverse shot so only one participant is on screen at a time. Nobody interacts with their environment; every battle occurs on a flat, empty plane. Some of the monsters are CGI and look awful. The character designs are bland and generic. Even the music, by the otherwise-excellent Yuki Kajiura, sounds like phoned-in B-sides from her work on Puella Magi Madoka Magica (2011) and its sequel film, Rebellion (2013).

But what the show does expend effort on is its backgrounds, which are both visually inventive—floating islands, towering columns that hold up the sky—and depicted with glimmering post-processing effects to bathe them in sunsets, sunrises, rainbows, and starry nights. First and foremost, Sword Art Online sells its virtual world to the viewer, makes them believe in that world the way the characters in the story do.

And in having that world sold to them, in expressing its legitimacy and the legitimacy of those (hero or villain) who believe in it, the Gamers had their rallying cry, the work of media that finally said: You are seen.

But was it really Gamers that Sword Art Online saw?

WHO IS THE FAKE GAMER?

While Sword Art Online is invested in selling its virtual world, it is not invested in selling its virtual game. The in-universe Sword Art Online is primarily defined by its lack of gameplay mechanics, rather than those it actually has. In Episode 1, Klein explains that the game lacks a magic system, which he describes as a "bold choice." In Episode 2, members of the raid party state that the game also lacks a job or class system. There is no long-ranged weaponry; everyone uses melee weapons, usually swords. The only strategy during raids is human wave tactics, where armies of players charge in and attack at once. The only cooperative maneuver is "Switch," a mechanic that is never explicitly explained but seems to involve a player who has already charged in backing off so another player can charge in their place.

Compared to even basic single-player RPGs, these mechanics are primitive; for an MMORPG, they're antediluvian. The point isn't whether a game with these mechanics would be fun or not (in many ways, it's similar to Dark Souls, where the basic core gameplay of dodge-and-hit is rendered meaningful by the consequences for failure), but rather that the game's mechanics have little importance within the story.

They're so unimportant that it's never explained why Kirito is so good at the game, what he's doing differently from everyone else. He's not even a grinder. He spends most of the first half of the story slumming on floors far beneath his level. It's no-nonsense Asuna who grinds hard, who tries to exploit the game mechanics, like when she proposes using NPCs to lure a boss. The plan makes logical sense, but logic is absent from Sword Art Online's ethos; Kirito rejects it, not on the grounds it wouldn't work, but because the NPCs would be killed. He prioritizes respecting the game world, while Asuna—at least initially—prioritizes respecting the game mechanics. Kirito's philosophy is ultimately proven right when he and Asuna adopt an NPC daughter who turns out to be sentient.

Meanwhile, Kirito's most impressive feat involves him ignoring the game's rules entirely. The one mechanic described in detail is that if you die in the game, you die in real life; when Kirito dies, though, he wills himself back alive to defeat the final boss.

The game, the experience of gaming, being a Gamer—none of these are part of the underlying ethos that guides the narrative decisions of Sword Art Online. Kirito didn't tell Klein, "I feel more alive playing this game." He said, "I feel more alive in this virtual world." Asuna didn't find happiness by exploiting the game, but by learning to live in it as though it were her real life. Kayaba didn't design Sword Art Online because he loves games, but because he wanted to make his world real.

This isn't a story about Gamers. It's a story about a virtual world. It's a story about the internet. It's a story about online community.

In his introduction to Speaker for the Dead (1986), Orson Scott Card describes the heroes of most science fiction novels as "perpetual adolescents": "He belongs to no community; he is wandering from place to place, doing good (as he sees it), but then moving on. This is the life of the adolescent, full of passion, intensity, magic, and infinite possibility; but lacking responsibility, rarely expecting to have to stay and bear the consequences of error […] Who but the adolescent is free to have the adventures that most of us are looking for when we turn to storytellers to satisfy our hunger? And yet to me, at least, the most important stories are the ones that teach us how to be civilized: the stories about children and adults, about responsibility and dependency."

Card, of course, wrote Gamer fiction long before anyone craved it. Ender's Game (1985) is obsessed with the mechanical minutiae of its titular game in a way Sword Art Online is not; its protagonist is successful in the mold of Asuna, able to understand and exploit game mechanics better than anyone else. But in this quote, Card describes Kirito perfectly. Kirito is, of course, an actual adolescent, emphasized by his character design and Columbine trench coat ("Don't show up to the GameStop tomorrow," you can almost hear him say), but his character is also adolescent in terms of Card's model. He spends the first half of the story as a solo player, wandering from floor to floor, doing good (usually), moving on. He lacks—or rather, avoids—responsibility. While Asuna is second-in-command of a top guild organizing high-level raids, Kirito is off on his own reviving some girl's Neopet.

When viewed from this perspective, Sword Art Online actually does have a coherent and comprehensible character arc for its otherwise inconsistent protagonist. Kirito develops as a result of his relationship with Asuna, finding through his marriage to her the responsibility that he previously forsook. When Kirito's error causes Sachi to die in Episode 3, he moves on, immediately abandons even his own trauma by Episode 4; Sachi is never mentioned again. (Of course not, since her story was one of the last ones written.) He feels no lasting responsibility for his actions. But later, Kirito realizes he could not brush off the trauma if the same thing happened to Asuna. It is through his responsibility to her that he joins the final raid and thus bears, shoulder to shoulder with everyone else, the cooperative responsibility of the entire virtual community of Sword Art Online. He has become an adult, with wife and child. He has become "more cultured, civilized[,] and empathetic," as Ebert would put it.

(And isn't that what Ebert is really saying, when he criticizes video games? That they are adolescent, childish, playthings?)

Through Kirito's character arc, and its underlying ethos about virtual worlds, Sword Art Online depicts online community via the language of marriage and responsibility that is traditionally ascribed to real-life community. This too resonated with its audience. After all, it wasn't just Gamers who craved recognition. Teenagers in 2012 had lived their entire conscious life in a world defined by the internet, and yet the "real world" considered online relationships and communities to be a joke. Sword Art Online, rather than legitimizing Gamers, legitimizes the virtual world, the internet.

But does it really even do that?

Immediately, Sword Art Online rejects the notion of online identity. Kayaba's first move upon trapping everyone inside the game is to force them all to look like their real-world selves. As per Sword Art Online's anti-logic ethos, he does not explain why he does this. Shortly afterward, Kirito looks at his real-world finger, which received a paper cut before he entered the game; he imagines it bleeding profusely, before saying, "It's not a game. It's real." By enforcing real-world identity within the game world, Kayaba possibly intends players to see the world as more real too, the way Kirito does. This fits the monomaniacal focus of Kayaba, and Sword Art Online as a story, on the importance of virtual space over any other aspect of virtual experience, and it's not surprising that Kirito tacitly agrees with Kayaba's decision when he and Klein tell each other they look better as their real selves than as their avatars. But it also alienates Sword Art Online from its connection to the reality of the internet, where personal identity is far more fluid.

Furthermore, despite his character arc, Kirito ultimately stands apart from his online community. At the end of the story, everyone lies on the ground paralyzed as he alone is given the privilege to duel the final boss, one-on-one. At this climactic moment, Kirito returns to being a solo player, while every other member of the community lacks agency, including Asuna. Especially Asuna. Shortly before the final battle, Asuna claims she'll commit suicide if Kirito dies, which is already an unhealthily adolescent view of marriage (as seen in Romeo & Juliet). Then, before the duel, when Asuna is paralyzed, Kirito demands that Kayaba "fix it so Asuna can't kill herself." Not only has Kayaba, the villain, stolen Asuna's agency over her own body, but now her husband is requesting he steal even more of it.

This, too, is part of Sword Art Online's ethos. Though the game has 10,000 people, nobody except Kirito actually matters. He is a "Solo Player" in the sense of Solo Leveling, the most popular airing anime, which has a mistranslated title; it should be "Only I Level Up." The implication of the real title is clear: Only the protagonist has agency. Kirito is the same. Only he plays the game, in any meaningful sense. The game—reality—bends to him; none of its rules, even death, constrain him.

It is total self-centeredness, a complete rejection of the responsibility to society that Card describes. This ethos pervades the show. Kirito is never wrong, even when he obviously is, like when he rejects Asuna's proposal to use NPCs as bait. The entire reason he realizes Heathcliff is Kayaba is because, during an earlier duel, Heathcliff beat him; Kirito (correctly) posits that someone who beat him must have been cheating. Everyone who likes Kirito is good, everyone who dislikes him is evil; Kuradeel, who chafes with Kirito initially over bureaucratic guild regulations, eventually unmasks himself as a sadistic serial killer. Every girl is in love with him, a harem rendered vestigial because Kirito is married to Asuna and expresses zero interest in Silica or Lisbeth or his sister or the second season's Carne Asada; but it's not about whether Kirito wants a harem, it's about the prestige of his ability to command one.

This is where the true face of Sword Art Online shows itself, what truly made it so popular, and where the core of its long-lasting influence remains.

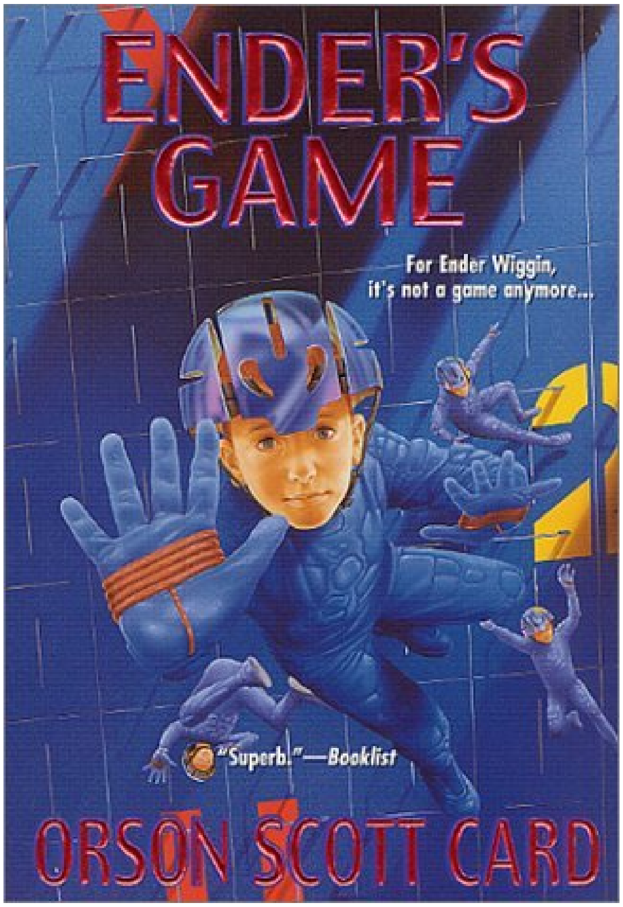
Only the virtual world matters. Not the game, not the online community, not online identity. Only a different world, one that isn't the real world. And in this world, only Kirito matters. Sure, he'll fight to protect other people. Exactly like he'll fight to protect NPCs. In this world, real people are worth the same as NPCs, compared to Kirito. His wife is a real person; his daughter is not. But really, both his marriage and his child are a form of playacting, pretending at adulthood. When convenient, they are disregarded and trampled upon. Asuna spends the next two arcs of Sword Art Online sidelined—even viciously sexually assaulted—so Kirito can hang out with girls he doesn't even like, just because they're shiny and new; Yui is almost completely forgotten after the second arc, like a discarded toy.

This is an ethos of pure, distilled escapism. It is an escape from the real world to a false one, where every conceivable selfish fantasy is rendered real, where every desire can be granted and then disposed of when no longer wanted. It is an ethos without responsibility, without consequence.

And without shame. Sword Art Online is remarkably devoid of self-consciousness. It treats as real its virtual world, but doesn't feel the need to justify that world with logic. It doesn't feel the need to justify anything with logic; what it says is so, self-evidently.

In my Kill la Kill essay, I mentioned Sword Art Online's vast influence, and someone wrote (and sadly deleted) a well-reasoned response that explained how the aesthetics and tropes of modern isekai are much more heavily influenced by Japanese webfic that predate Sword Art Online, like GATE or Overlord or Re:Zero. That's true; I'd add that modern Gamer fiction, which is often obsessively concerned with the rules and statistics underlying game logic, is also not very similar to Sword Art Online on a superficial level. But Sword Art Online's ethos transcends genre. It can be found in isekai, Gamer lit, or even genres popular long before Sword Art Online, like battle shounen. Sword Art Online created the web fiction to light novel to anime pipeline, and in doing so popularized amateur literature and its decidedly adolescent mentality of shameless and solipsistic self-indulgence. "Only I Play the Game."

Chapter 12: Ender's Game (novel)



Is Ender Wiggin (pictured above as the little brother from Malcolm in the Middle) guilty of xenocide?

Actually, let's first answer a different, but related, question:

What game does the title "Ender's Game" refer to?

It's not as simple a question as it seems. There are three games that have a prominent role in the plot, all very different from one another.

The obvious answer is the Battle School zero-gravity game, where teams of competitors play glorified laser tag in a big empty cube. In terms of page count, most of the book is dedicated to this game. It's also the game depicted on the cover of the edition above.

Yet this game vanishes during the story's climax, when Ender is given a new game to play, a game he is told is a simulator of spaceship warfare. This "game" turns out to not be a game at all, though; after annihilating the alien homeworld in the final stage, Ender learns that he was actually commanding real ships against real enemies the whole time, and that he just singlehandedly ended the Human-Bugger war forever via total xenocide of the aliens. This is both the final game and the most consequential to the plot, despite the short amount of time it appears.

There's also a third game, a single-player video game Ender plays throughout the story. The game is procedurally generated by an AI to respond to the player's emotional state, and is used as a psychiatric diagnostic for the players. Of the three games, this is the one that probes deepest into Ender's psyche, that most defines him as a person; it's also the final image of the story, as the aliens build a facsimile of its world in reality after psychically reading Ender's mind while he xenocides them.

Because all three games are important, the easiest answer might be that the question doesn't matter, that the story is called Ender's Game not to propose this question at all but simply because the technically more accurate "Ender's Games" would improperly suggest a story about a serial prankster.

Fine. But why does the title use the possessive "Ender's" at all?

He does not own any of these games. He did not create them. He does not facilitate them. All of these games, even the simulator game, predate his use of them as a player, were not designed with him in mind, were intended to train and assess potential commanders for, ostensibly, the hundred years since the last Human-Bugger war.

It's in this question that we get to the crux of what defines Gamer literature.

These games are Ender's games because he dominates them into being about him. He enters a rigidly-defined, rules-based system, and excels so completely that the games warp around his presence. In the Battle School game, the administrators stack the odds against Ender, thereby rendering every other player's presence in the game irrelevant except in their function as challenges for Ender to overcome. The administrators acknowledge this in an argument among themselves:

> "The game will be compromised. The comparative standings will become meaningless." [...] "You're getting too close to the game, Anderson. You're forgetting that it is merely a training exercise." "It's also status, identity, purpose, name; all that makes these children who they are comes out of this game. When it becomes known that the game can be manipulated, weighted, *cheated*, it will undo this whole school. I'm not exaggerating." "I know." "So I hope Ender Wiggin truly is the one, because you'll have degraded the effectiveness of our training method for a long time to come."

In this argument, Anderson views the game the way games have been viewed since antiquity: exercises in acquiring honor and status. This honor is based on the innate fairness inherent to games as rule-based systems, which is why in ancient depictions of sport the chief character is often not a competitor but the host, who acts as referee. In Virgil's Aeneid, for instance, the hero Aeneas hosts a series of funeral games (the games themselves intended as an honor for his dead father). Despite being the principal character of the epic, Aeneas does not compete in these games. Instead, he doles out prizes to each competitor based on the worthiness they display; his fairness marks him symbolically as a wise ruler. The Arthurian tournament is another example, where Arthur as host is the principal character, and the knights (Lancelot, Tristan, etc.) who compete do so primarily to receive honors from him or his queen.

In Ender's Game, it is the antagonistic figure Bonzo Madrid who embodies this classical concept of honor; the word defines him, is repeated constantly ("his Spanish honor"), drives his blistering hatred of Ender, who receives both unfair boons and unfair banes from the game's administrators, who skirts the rules of what is allowed to secure victory. Bonzo is depicted as a stupid, bull-like figure; his honor is ultimately worthless, trivially manipulated by Ender in their final fight.

Meanwhile, it's Ender's disregard for honor, his focus solely on his namesake -- ending, finishing the game, the ends before the means -- that makes him so valuable within the scope of the story. He is "the one," as Anderson puts it, the solipsistically important Gamer, the Only I Play the Game-r, because the game now matters in and of itself, rather than as a social activity. In the Aeneid and in Arthur, the competitors are soldiers, for whom there is a world outside the game. Their games are not a substitute for war but a reprieve from it, and as such they are an activity meant to hold together the unifying fabric of society. The values Anderson espouses (status, identity, purpose, name) are fundamentally more important in this social framework than winning (ending) is.

Ender's game, as the Goosebumps-style blurb on my 20-year-old book fair edition's cover proclaims, is not just a game anymore. Its competitors are also soldiers, but the game is meant to prepare them for war; the spaceship video game is actual war. And as this is a war for the survival of the human race, as Ender is told, there is no need for honor. The othered enemy must be annihilated, without remorse or mercy.

This ethos of the game as fundamentally important for its own sake pervades Gamer literature beyond Ender's Game. In Sword Art Online, dying in the game is dying in real life, and as such, only Kirito's ability to beat the game matters. Like Ender, Kirito is immediately disdained by his fellow players as a "cheater" (oh sorry, I mean a "beater") because he possesses inherent advantages due to being a beta player. In an actual game, a game that is only a game, Kirito's cheat powers would render the game pointless. What purpose does Kirito winning serve if he does it with Dual Wielding, an overpowered skill that only he is allowed to have? But when a game has real stakes, when only ability to win matters, it is possible to disregard fairness and see the cheater as heroic.

This notion of the "cheat power," a unique and overpowered ability only the protagonist has, is pervasive in post-SAO Gamer literature. To those for whom games are simply games, such powers can only be infuriating and obnoxious betrayals of the purpose of games; to those for whom games mean more than just games, for whom games have a primacy of importance, these powers are all that matter.

That's the core conceit of Gamer literature: the idea that the Game is life, that winning is, in fact, everything.

What sets Ender's Game apart from Sword Art Online is that it creates the inverted world where the Game matters above all, but then draws back the curtain to reveal the inversion. The Buggers are, in fact, no longer hostile. They are not planning to invade Earth again, as Ender has been told his entire life. The war, for them, is entirely defensive, and Ender is the aggressor. And due to Ender's singleminded focus on Ending, on winning, on disregarding honor and fairness, he ultimately commits the xenocide, erases an entire sentient species from existence. He wins a game he should never have been playing.

The obvious counterargument, the one I imagine everyone who has read this book thought up the moment I posed the question at the beginning of this essay, is that Ender did not know he was committing xenocide. The fact that the combat simulator game was not a game was withheld from him until afterward. Plus, he was a child.

Salient arguments all. Ones the book itself makes, via Ender's commander, Graff, to absolve him of sin at the end. They're probably even correct, in a legal sense (I'm not a legal scholar, don't quote me), and in a moral sense. In real life, it would be difficult to blame a 10-year-old in those circumstances for what he did. But in the thematic framework of Ender's Game the book, these arguments are completely inadequate.

Ender has been playing a fourth game the entire story. And this is the only game he doesn't win.

A game is defined by its system of control and limitation over the behavior of the players. A game has *rules*. His whole life, Ender has been playing within the rules of the system of control his military commanders place upon him.

Their control extends even before he was born; as a third child in a draconian two-child-only world, his existence is at the behest of the government. Graff confirms this to Ender's parents when he recruits him to Battle School: "Of course we already have your consent, granted in writing at the time conception was confirmed, or he could not have been born. He has been ours since then, if he qualified." Graff frames this control utterly, in terms of possession: "he has been ours." He does not exaggerate. Since Ender was young, he has had a "monitor" implanted in his body so the army could observe him at all times, assess whether he "qualifies"; even the brief moment the monitor is removed is a test. "The final step in your testing was to see what would happen when the monitor came off," Graff explains after Ender passes the test by murdering a 6-year-old. Conditions are set up for Ender, similar to the unfair challenges established in the Battle School game; he is isolated from his peers, denied practice sessions, held in solitary confinement on a remote planetoid. It's all in service of assessing Ender as "the one."

Ender wins this game in the sense that he does, ultimately, become "the one" -- the one Graff and the other military men want, the xenocider of the Buggers. He fails this game in the sense that he does not break it.

The other three games Ender plays, he breaks. Usually by cheating. In the single-player psychiatry game, when presented with a deliberately impossible challenge where a giant gives him two glasses to pick between, Ender cheats and kills the giant. "Cheater, cheater!" the dying giant shouts. In the Battle School game, Ender is ultimately confronted by insurmountable odds: 2 armies against his 1. He cannot outgun his opponent, so he cheats by using most of his troops as a distraction so five soldiers can sneak through the enemy's gate, ending the game. At the school, going through the gate is traditionally seen as a mere formality, something done ceremonially once the enemy team is wiped out (there's that honor again, that ceremony), but it *technically* causes a win. Even Anderson, the game's administrator, sees this as a breach of the rules when Ender confronts him afterward.

> Ender was smiling. "I beat you again, sir," he said. "Nonsense, Ender," Anderson said softly. "Your battle was with Griffin and Tiger." "How stupid do you think I am?" Ender said. Loudly, Anderson said, "After that little maneuver, the rules are being revised to require that all of the enemy's soldiers must be frozen or disabled before the gate can be reversed."

(I include the first part of that quote to indicate that Ender all along knows who he is really playing this game against -- the administrators, the military men who control every facet of his life.)

Ender beats the war simulator game in a similar fashion. Outnumbered this time 1000-to-1, he uses his soldiers as sacrifices to sneak a single bomb onto the alien's homeworld, destroying it and committing his xenocide. Ender himself sees this maneuver as breaking the rules, and in fact falsely believes that if he breaks the rules he will be disqualified, set free from the fourth game: "If I break this rule, they'll never let me be a commander. It would be too dangerous. I'll never have to play a game again. And that is victory." The flaw in his logic comes not from whether he's breaking the rules of the game, but which game he is breaking the rules of. It's not the fourth game, Ender's game, but the war simulator game, simply a sub-game within the confines of the fourth game, a sub-game the fourth game's administrators want him to break, a sub-game that gives Ender the illusion of control by breaking. When Ender tells his administrators about his plan, the response he receives almost taunts him to do it:

> "Does the Little Doctor work against a planet?" Mazer's face went rigid. "Ender, the buggers never deliberately attacked a civilian population in either invasion. You decide whether it would be wise to adopt a strategy that would invite reprisals."

(And if it wasn't clear how much the administrators wanted him to do this all along, the moment he does it, they flood the room with cheers.)

Ender wins his games by cheating -- by fighting the rules of the game itself -- and yet he never cheats at the fourth game, the game of his life.

In this fourth game, he always plays by the rules.

In the inverted world of Gamer lit, where games define everything, including life and death, it's a common, even natural progression for the Gamer to finally confront the game's administrator. Sword Art Online ends when Kirito defeats Akihiko Kayaba, the developer. In doing so, Kirito exceeds the confines of the game, not simply by ignoring its rules and coming back to life after he's killed, but by demonstrating mastery against the game's God. Afterward, Sword Art Online truly becomes Kirito's Game, with nobody else able to lay claim to the possessive. Kirito demonstrates this control at the end of the anime by recreating Sword Art Online's world using its source code, completing the transition into a player-administrator.

(Though I wonder, how much of a class reading could one give to this new brand of Gamer lit? If classical games were told from the perspective of the one who controlled them, then is there not something innately anti-establishment in Kirito overcoming the controller? This is the gist of many other death game stories, like The Hunger Games, though none of them may be the most sophisticated takes on the subject, more empty fantasy than anything else.)

Ender never fights or defeats his administrators. He never even tries, other than rare periods of depressive inactivity. He doesn't try even though the option is proposed to him by Dink Meeker, an older student whom Ender respects:

> "I'm not going to let the bastards run me, Ender. They've got you pegged, too, and they don't plan to treat you kindly. Look what they've done to you so far." "They haven't done anything except promote me." "And she make you life so easy, neh?" Ender laughed and shook his head. "So maybe you're right." "They think they got you on ice. Don't let them." "But that's what I came for," Ender said. "For them to make me into a tool."

Instead, Ender finds comfort in the control exerted on his life. When sent to Earth on leave, he seeks out a lake that reminds him of living in Battle School.

> "I spend a lot of time on the water. When I'm swimming, it's like being weightless. I miss being weightless. Also, when I'm here on the lake, the land slopes up in every direction." "Like living in a bowl." "I've lived in a bowl for four years."

Because of this, Ender never cheats against Graff. He could; Graff states several times that Ender is smarter than him, and the fact that they have Ender fighting the war instead of Graff is proof he believes it. But Ender never considers it. He never considers gaming the system of his life.

If Gamer literature emphasizes the inversion of the world order, where games supersede reality in importance (and, as in Sword Art Online, only through this inverted order is one able to claim real power by being a Gamer), then Ender's Game acknowledges both sides of the inversion. For Ender, the games he plays are not simply games anymore. The psychology game, the Battle School game, the war simulator game; all of these he must win at all costs, even if it requires disrespecting the foundational purpose of these games. But his real life? Ender *wants* that to be a game, craves it to be a game, can't live unless the walls slope up around him like a bowl, can't stand it unless there is a system of control around him. He does what Graff tells him, even though he recognizes immediately that Graff is not his friend, that Graff is the one isolating him from others, rigging things against him. He does what Graff tells him all the way up to and including xenocide, because Ender cannot tell game from real life. That's the core deception at the end: Ender is playing a game that's actually real and he doesn't know it -- or refuses to acknowledge it, since nobody has ever tricked the genius Ender before this point.

Actually, that's not true. They tricked him twice before. Ender twice attacks his peers physically, with brutal violence. The administrators conceal from him that he murdered both his foes; he simply thinks he hurt them. The only way to trick Ender is to do so in a way that insulates him from the consequences of his actions. The only way he will allow himself to be tricked.

So, is Ender guilty of xenocide?

Under it all, Ender believes he is.

The dying Buggers, after reading Ender's mind, recreate the psychology game in the real world. The story ends when Ender finds this recreation, yet another blurring of the lines between game and reality.

The psychology game is different from the other games Ender plays, because nobody expects him to win it. Its purpose is not to be won, simply to assess his mental health. Yet Ender approaches it like the other games, cheats at it and systematically kills all his enemies until he reaches a place called The End of the World. (Another End for Ender.) His drive to win, to dominate, does not come solely from the pressures of the system around him, but from deep within himself, which is what Ender fears the most. But it is here, at The End of the World, where Ender finds atonement, both in the game and in the game-made-real. In the game, he kisses his opponent instead of killing them, and reaches a resolution he is happy with. He stops playing the game after doing this, though the game seems to continue (when an administrator asks him why he stopped playing it, he says "I beat it"; the administrator tells him the game cannot be beaten). It is through this act of love that Ender can escape the game-like system of control that puppeteers him no matter how smart and clever he is or thinks he is.

In the game-made-real, Ender finds his atonement in the same place, The End of the World. The Buggers left for him here, in this place that they (reading his mind) understood as the location of his mercy and compassion, an egg that can repopulate their species. Through this egg, Ender is given the chance to undo his xenocide. But that chance is also contingent on what The End of the World means to Ender, an end to the game, not simply the games he plays but the fourth game, the game of his life. Ender's Game.

Chapter 13: BanG Dream! Ave Mujica (anime)

It's 2008, and Doug Walker is confused.

The famous film critic is doing a ten-year retrospective on Pokémon: The First Movie (1998). While watching the opening scene, in which a group of scientists explore a jungle, he poses a series of questions: "What are those things? Who are you? Where are we? What's that thing? Where am I? Is this Earth? Are we in another dimension? Is this the past? The future? The present? What's going on?! Where does this even take place?! Oh, my God, I'm, like, one minute into this movie, already I'm totally lost!"

To Walker's credit, Pokémon is a notoriously impenetrable narrative, known for its high complexity and thematic depth. As he explains: "For those of you who don't know what [Pokémon]'s about, I can't help you because *nobody* knew what the hell it was about. [...] Nobody could follow it. The only people who understood it at all were the kids."

A similar confusion descended upon me as, on the recommendation of several people in my orbit who called it the criminally underrated sleeper hit of the season, I watched the first episode of BanG Dream! Ave Mujica. They compared it to Umineko, Madoka Magica. None of them told me the show is a sequel (to 2023's BanG Dream! It's MyGO!!!!!), nor any other crucial bits of context: that plot details and twists have been foreshadowed via ARG; that there are music videos for the songs the show's band plays, themselves containing oblique hints to the narrative; that the band itself is *real*, not in the vtuber sense where rigged anime girls bob their heads on stream but in the sense that each character is voice acted by the members of a real five-person band called Ave Mujica that plays live shows in goth costumes.

©BanG Dream! Project

Oh no, I thought. I've stepped into a bear trap!(!!!!)

My initial confusion mostly stemmed from the show expecting the audience to already know all the characters, not simply the five members of the band Ave Mujica but also the five members of the band MyGO!!!!!, who are the main focus of the predecessor series. There are few establishing shots, few immediate character beats that cause one character to stand out from the rest, and the character designs have the traditional sameface of idol anime, so hair and eye color are often the only notable aesthetic differences between them. I watch a lot of anime, and sameface doesn't usually throw me, but here it was a struggle to tell some characters apart (particularly Ave Mujica's two blonde guitarists, Uika and Mutsumi).

Disorientation can cause one to stop thinking at all, though, even to understand things that are perfectly understandable. The irony of Walker's baffled series of questions about the opening scene of the Pokémon movie is how most of them pertain to the setting, when the scene's setting (the real-world nation of Guyana) never appeared before or since in the franchise; even the most dedicated six-year-old had as much ability to answer questions about it as Walker himself. It's not even important, really, in the scope of the plot. It's a jungle somewhere, some distant land. It's in one scene and disappears forever. But Walker, like most parents of 1998, encountered a few details he couldn't understand (the franchise's foreign-sounding name, the endless array of unique monsters) and gave up trying to understand anything at all.

In Walker's defense, the most insidious aspect of confusion is not knowing what you don't know. A Pokémon fan watches that opening scene, well aware of the *typical* setting of Pokémon, and thus knows that this jungle setting is someplace new, some foreign locale, something they're not *supposed* to know. Walker cannot, at a glance, discern that. To him, maybe this jungle is the primary location where the action is set. Maybe he really is at a disadvantage for not being aware of it already.

The trick to understanding Ave Mujica is that the five members of MyGO!!!!! do not matter nearly as much as their screentime suggests. There is some connection, as two members of Ave Mujica (Sakiko and Mutsumi) were previously in a band (CRYCHIC) with three members of MyGO!!!!!, and Sakiko's abrupt and unexplained departure from CRYCHIC is the root of the interpersonal drama between Sakiko and Mutsumi. Otherwise, the MyGO!!!!!ites serve as outsiders to the main drama who look in and occasionally comment on it; not knowing anything about them is fine. Once I figured that out around Episode 3 or 4, the show became generally comprehensible.

I think.

It's 2019, and Doug Walker is confused.

Everyone is. A collective confusion as, during the climax of his avant garde musical reassessment of Pink Floyd The Wall (1982), an anthropomorphic mustelid slithers onto his shoulder while singing a Cockney rendition of "The Trial". Across a series of discombobulated fantasy landscapes, Walker has been regaled by this and several other digital creatures designed with an almost obscene attention to detail, lavish fur and fabric textures far beyond the pale of Walker's more workman-like VFX flair. If there was context, it has been lost in the characters' impenetrable accents and vocal layering. All anyone watching can do is ask:

What are those things? Who are you? Where are we? What's that thing? Where am I? Is this Earth? Are we in another dimension? Is this the past? The future? The present? What's going on?! Where does this even take place?!

Nobody can follow it...

Except Doug Walker. This isn't the reason he's confused. If anything, he is oddly, uncharacteristically accepting of the situation. He is a critic best known for animated facial expressions and wild gesticulations, but here he stands perfectly still almost the entire length of the song, even as the CGI creatures pluck his hat off his head or lift him bodily into the air or toss him into a little spike-studded Doug Cage. His face is stone.

No, this is a Walker who exhibits, at last, mastery over the raw facts of narrative. It is not plot, character, or setting that confuse Walker about The Wall. When he criticizes the song "Another Brick in the Wall Pt. 2", he correctly assesses that the song is about the cruelty of the education system. What he's confused about, lacking the cultural context of British grammar schools in the 1950s, is what this *means*, how to interpret it. He can only do so in the frame of the suburban American education system he remembers, and so ascribes to the song meaning relevant to that context; namely, that school isn't *that* bad, that teachers can be nice, and that anti-school youth sentiment is meaningless counterculture. It's a misunderstanding, not of fact, but of heart. "Pretentious," Walker calls it, a word he repeats across the video. Pretentiousness is a fixation of Walker's. He loves the word; he uses it often. It's perhaps the perfect word for a workman-like man like Doug Walker, one of the first true outsiders to achieve success in the democratized media landscape of the internet.

"Pretentious" means the author believes their work possesses more meaning and importance than the critic can derive from it.

This confusion of interpretation struck me too as I watched Ave Mujica, even when I understood on a summary level the plot and characters. In the first episode, one of the few characters to distinctively establish herself is Ave Mujica's drummer, Nyamu, who starts a catty argument with the band's keyboardist and founder, Sakiko. The crux of the argument is simple. Part of Ave Mujica's gimmick as an avant garde act that blends live music with acted skit segments is that its five members wear masks on stage, concealing their identities. Nyamu, in Walkeresque fashion, wants to dispense with this "pretension," claiming to be bored of it. Her true goal is mercenary; she believes, as the only band member who is not already established in the entertainment industry, that publicly associating herself with her more famous bandmates will elevate her personal profile.

Sakiko, for whom this project is an artistic venture of deep psychological importance, rejects her proposal. But Nyamu disregards her bandmates' wishes and forcibly unmasks them at the next concert anyway.

I understood the argument. What I didn't understand was how to feel about it, how interpret Nyamu's role in the story. In a vacuum, I could only imagine she was intended as the show's villain. She is vain, petty, a shameless social climber, self-absorbed, a YouTuber, and also the driver of the initial conflict that causes the other bandmates to spiral psychologically out of control. Beyond that, she is *commercial*. In my preconceived cultural understanding of "fiction about art," the sellout is the villain, and the person with legitimate artistic vision (in this case, Sakiko) is the hero. The rest of the first episode supports this reading: it focuses on Sakiko's perspective and home life in a way that lends her significant pathos, while Nyamu exists solely to cause her grief.

Yet the rest of the show does not support this reading. When a band member has a schizophrenic break a few episodes later, *Sakiko* is framed as the core cause, due to her demanding auteurism. Nyamu, who sparked the inciting incident, is never blamed, either by the other characters or by the narrative as she slips away, unregenerate, into a minor and isolated subplot. She never abandons or even interrogates her crass commercialism, and despite being the most replaceable member of the band and the least interconnected to the others' social circle (she appears, actually, to be a college-aged adult while everyone else is a high schooler), nobody suggests she be replaced when the band breaks up and reforms. Nobody demands anything of her at all. Nobody even really seems to see her as a *problem*.

I love it. I love it when shameless little shits don't get any comeuppance at all. I love Nyamu. (Honestly!)

But how am I supposed to interpret her argument, within the framework of Ave Mujica as a story?

The obvious interpretation is that Nyamu is correct, or at least in wake of the show's ambivalence toward her, not wrong. Cynical commercialism has value, is at least an important consideration for artistic decisions. This interpretation makes sense considering it's the artiste Sakiko who winds up shouldering the blame for the band's internal collapse, but at the same time it's a bizarre proclamation to make in a show that is otherwise so concerned with rendering Sakiko empathically, with exploring her psyche and motivations, and with -- ultimately -- selling the audience her artistry. Ave Mujica, as I explained, is a real band. All the goth flair, the arcane skits, the oblique narrative hints, and the doll symbolism that are core to Sakiko the character's artistic vision are also core to the real-life Ave Mujica the band. It's inconceivable to me that the show is actually dismissing its own aesthetic as "pretentious." Why, then, does its own in-universe Nyastalgia Critic go unchallenged, escape unscathed? What does it mean that these criticisms emerge not from unconnected outsiders (even with five members of MyGO!!!!! right there, with their significantly more down-to-earth, more workman-like band) but from one-fifth of Ave Mujica itself?

What, exactly, is Ave Mujica's identity?

モーションアクター
Jakko　木須実怜花
藤白えんり　茉莉奈
牛谷琴音　mika
米澤茜
モーションアクターコーディネート
打上隼己
モーションキャプチャスタジオ
exsa×スタジオ タンタ
大貫直人　佐藤純恵
新家勇太　新井伸弥
豊田翔弓　石田力也
モデリングディレクター
武内泰久　寺林寛
松橋和樹　横山貴央
南和輝
モデラー
白川和季　瀬川佳菜

It's 2013, and Doug Walker is confused.

Existentially.

The video is titled "The Review Must Go On," with an ominous subtitle in the vein of End of Evangelion: "Demo Reel Finale." Something, indeed, is coming to an end here, and it isn't just Doug Walker's lifelong passion project.

In this postmodern künstlerroman, Doug Walker stares into a mirror, but what he sees is not Doug Walker. It is his past and it will be his future. (*Is this the past? The future? The present? What's going on?!*) It is the fixed and unchanging edifice of 18 long years and counting, an entity unstuck from time, who, despite changes to format, site, contemporary taste, and the internet itself, remains immutable. It cannot be denied, cannot be destroyed, can only -- briefly -- be bargained with.

And Doug Walker bargains. "Not every week," he says, staring down his creation. "Once every two weeks." His creation, only somewhat put off, accedes. (Now, in 2025, it's once a week once more.) A single word: "Done," and the deal is made.

"Alright then," Walker says, with a beleaguered sigh. "What's next?"

The cold voice replies: "I think you know what's next."

Walker does know. He returns to his desk, where he had been typing the script to the Demo Reel Finale, and dutifully writes what he has known all along. Donnie DuPre, the main character of Demo Reel, that lifelong passion project, that original creative work, was always *him*.

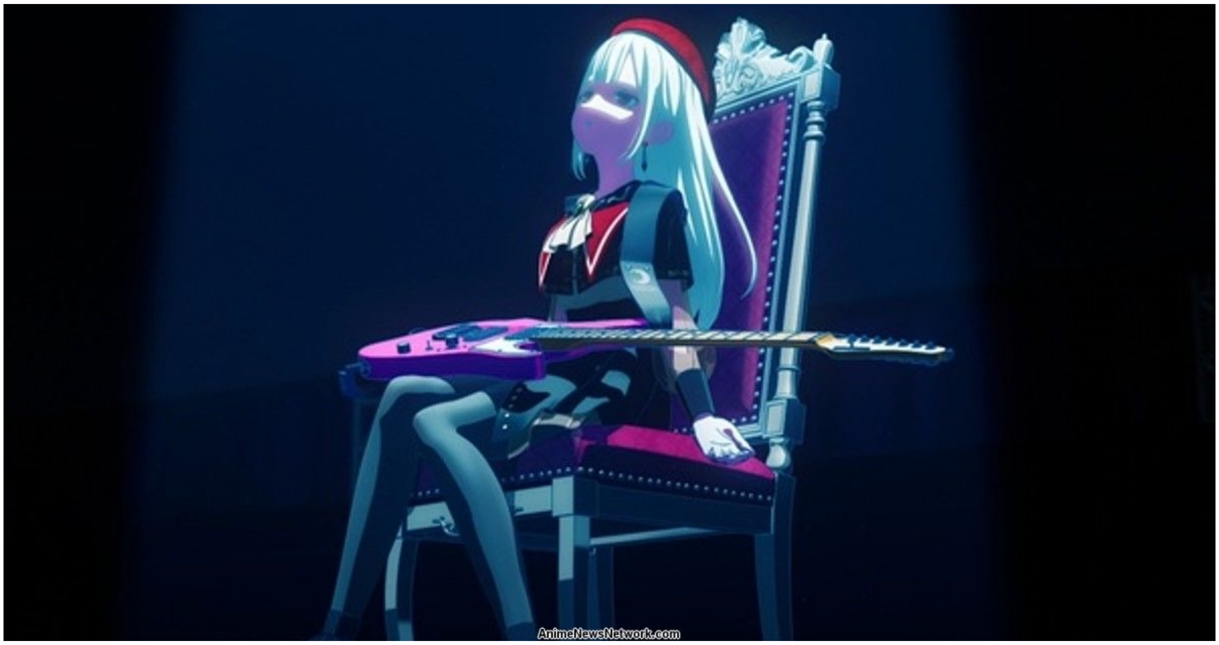
The Nostalgia Critic.

It's a final surrender. There will be no more passion projects. No delusions of artistic accomplishment. None, at least, that don't involve this thing that Doug Walker has become, this thing to which he has given the rest of his life.

This moment mirrors the argument between Nyamu and Sakiko. Though Walker claims otherwise in the video, the decision to revive the Nostalgia Critic is clearly commercial; the Nostalgia Critic is popular, Demo Reel is not. Walker has abandoned his artistic vision in favor of what sells. Nyamu has won.

Except it's Sakiko, not Nyamu, who makes the demands that the Nostalgia Critic makes of Doug Walker. "I am not going to let this band be just a passing fad," Sakiko says. "I told you. Give me the rest of your life."

Doug Walker is giving the rest of his life to the Nostalgia Critic. Is trapped by it. As Ave Mujica progresses, its members become similarly ensnared. I claimed previously that Nyamu is never punished by the narrative, never challenged by the other band members or blamed for her actions, nobody ever attempts to get her replaced, but the opposite side of that coin is that she is incapable of getting herself replaced despite her desire to use the band as a stepping stone for a personal career. Though she gains industry connections via a bandmate's actress mother, she is crippled by the memory of one of Ave Mujica's most perplexing images, an image that similarly left me at an utter loss: the guitarist Mutsumi, collapsed in a disassociating stupor, on stage before an audience of thousands.



This moment is the beginning of Mutsumi's character arc, in which she is consumed by her band persona, Mortis, in a literalized split-personality storyline that itself has obvious parallels to Doug Walker's relationship with the Nostalgia Critic in The Review Must Go On. What fascinates me about this moment, though, is the reaction of everyone watching. The moment Mutsumi unexpectedly collapses, Sakiko deftly weaves it into the band's narrative, concocting a story about how the song they were playing lulls the "dolls" (Ave Mujica's band members) into eternal slumber, before abruptly ending the entire concert. The other four members step off the stage, leaving only the collapsed Mutsumi in the spotlight, motionless and silent.

The audience loves it. The band explodes in popularity. It's such a memetic event that the fans become disappointed when it isn't repeated at the next concert; Nyamu suggests that they repeat it, even to the point of showing up to concerts and not playing music at all. "Ignoring the audience's expectations -- what's the point of that?"

Nobody, in or out of the band, reads Mutsumi's collapse as a cry for help.

She can't cry for help. No matter what she does. When the band announces their breakup, she screams hysterically on the stage, even as the other four members are quiet. "Mutsumi was cooking until the end," a social media post later remarks. She has a breakdown on the street, arguing with her split personality in Gollum/Smeagol fashion (complete with camera angles swapping back and forth to indicate her two selves), and though people gather around and film it, the audience's only possible interpretation of the event is that it is a promotional stunt for the band. Even Nyamu, haunted by that image of Mutsumi collapsed in the chair, isn't haunted because of the psychological toll her actions inflicted on her bandmate (and, eventually, primary yuri shipmate), but because she believes Mutsumi was *acting*, acting so ingeniously that it torments Nyamu she cannot achieve that same level of skill.

Mutsumi is entrapped within the narrative ambiguity of Ave Mujica. Like Doug Walker, everyone watching her is confidently confused, only able to interpret her actions within their own contextual framework.

What is the contextual framework of Ave Mujica, though? It is a Babushka doll of meaning, an anime based on a real band that contains within it contradictory proponents of artistic vision and common-denominator commercialism, that is itself contradictorily artistic -- if my struggle to interpret it is enough to suggest -- and commercial, the way its poetic symbolism about dolls and control is draped on samefaced 3D anime girl models that move stiffly and unconvincingly. But the show is willing to make those 3D models contort their faces into distinctively un-idol-like (distinctively Doug Walker-like) maniacal expressions, to throw them on the ground and scrape open their knees with blood streaming out, to have them hurl each other down the stairs in fits of rage, to pair them in incestuous yuri couplings. The story both gesticulates toward a cynical, darker take on the idol industry like Perfect Blue or Oshi no Ko, yet is part of an established idol franchise selling these characters as actual idols. Even in the narrative, the depiction of the idol industry is confused; the band seems to have no managers, no agents, nobody telling them what to do. They don't even have secretaries; bassist Umiri handles scheduling and itineraries. Men only exist in the world of BanG Dream! as fathers or grandfathers; every behind-the-scenes staffer at the concerts, in fact every concertgoer, is female.

Nyamu is not Akane Yonezawa, Ave Mujica's real life drummer. But both are industry outsiders in their first real role, compared to their four bandmates who are already established. Rich girl keyboardist Sakiko is not Kanon Takao, but Kanon Takao was winning international piano tournaments in Milan at age 10. Where is the line between fiction and reality? How real is this anime, and how fake is this band? How much is the Nostalgia Critic a character, and how much is he Doug Walker with a hat?

And isn't it within this endless array of ambiguity, of questions, of confusion, that Ave Mujica ensnares? "Give me the rest of your life," Sakiko says, but with these ARGs and multimedia comb-over-it-with-a-magnifying-glass details and crossovers with other bands, whose life is she demanding? To the incurious, the Doug Walkers, confusion is enough to dismiss out of hand. But for those who want to know more, there are an endless amount of dolls to open...

Perhaps Walker was right, all those years ago in 2008, to not gaze too deeply into the world of Pokémon. It is a franchise, after all, that has exploited the human instinct toward curiosity to become the highest-selling media property of all time.

("Ignoring the audience's expectations -- what's the point of that?" Nyamu says.)

It's 2021, and Dan Olson is confused.

He is a critic criticizing a critic. In this case, he is criticizing Doug Walker's review of The Wall. Unbelievably, this criticism has over 2 million more views than Doug Walker's The Wall video does. Over twice as many people have seen this criticism than the thing being criticized.

Olson asks:

"What is this? Why does this exist?"

He doesn't know why Doug Walker would do this. Why would he put such elaborate effort into a musical review of The Wall, something Walker barely seems to understand or care about at all, something he only seems to have watched for the first time in preparation for creating the review. Walker's lack of curiosity baffles Olson, particularly because it is balanced against the effort on display in the review itself. How can someone spend months on costumes, visuals, parody lyrics, and celebrity guests, all to call something pretentious?

What Olson doesn't realize is that there is a Doug Walker, wannabe filmmaker, involved in this production, a Doug Walker with -- for better or for worse -- an artistic vision, who is willing to go to great lengths to apply that vision.

But someone else is running the show. Someone to whom Doug Walker has given the rest of his life. He's called the Nostalgia Critic, but, as in Ave Mujica, this avatar of commercial greed is only an abstraction, isn't it? A figment of ambiguity in which all cries for help, no matter how loudly they are screamed, can be extinguished. There's someone else, unseen and unacknowledged, with *real* control over these dolls, the one who forces them to perform as perfect time capsules, ageless and eternal. I'm not sure what they're called for Ave Mujica, but for Doug Walker, their name can be found with a bit of searching: Mike Michaud.

"Let me show you," says that anthropomorphic mustelid, Lucy Lacemaker, as the first notes of The Trial begin. "Let me show you what happens when your dreams no longer need *you*."

Chapter 14: Hell's Paradise: Jigokuraku (anime)

At the end of my Dandadan review, I discovered that Dandadan was written by a former assistant of Tatsuki Fujimoto, author of Chainsaw Man (which I also reviewed). A lot of my Dandadan review was about how much it was seemingly influenced by Chainsaw Man, even before I knew about the connection, and upon learning it I got the idea to watch another adaptation of a manga written by a Fujimoto assistant: Hell's Paradise. My idea was, by tracing Fujimoto's influence, I could get a better idea of what, truly, Fujimoto brings to the table as a creative figure -- or at least what people are taking away from his work.

Approaching Hell's Paradise from this angle was actually fascinating, because it is both recognizably influenced by Fujimoto but is also influenced in a way that is almost diametrically opposite the influences seen in Dandadan. Dandadan emphasizes Fujimoto's irreverence, focusing its plot on the emasculation of its protagonist, the strong women who push him around, and especially humor, particularly humor that undercuts its otherwise treacly emotional beats.

The first thing I noticed about Hell's Paradise is that it isn't funny. There are few jokes; those that do exist are usually dry, something that provokes a chuckle at best. Accordingly, the tone is much more consistently serious than Dandadan or even Chainsaw Man.

In fact, other than the structure of a few fight scenes, and main character Gabimaru constantly repeating his motivation to the audience (I need to get the elixir so I can go home to my wife!), Hell's Paradise doesn't feel much like a shounen at all, either traditionally or in the irreverent-emasculatory subversive way of the other two works. It did remind me of something else, though, something I am truly and deeply familiar with, a brand of story near and dear to my heart:

The SciFi Channel Original Movie.

Until the tragic and disgraceful Sharknado in 2013, when these films started being intentionally bad for memetic reasons, the SciFi Channel (now called Syfy) churned out (or rather bought the rights to) an endless array of straight-to-DVD shlock B-movies. They would premiere a new one almost every week, and I was always there for it. Though there were so many of these it'd make your head spin, the most common were shameless echos of one of the following two plots:

The Jaws plot: A monster of some sort, or a swarm of monsters, is loose near a small town. A local sheriff and/or local scientist is aware of the monster and tries to convince the mayor it exists, but there's a major festival/tourist season coming up and the mayor refuses to listen. The monster(s) predictably attack the festival, causing a major bloodbath, before the sheriff/scientist manage to kill the monster(s) and save the day. Examples: Snakehead Terror, Swarmed, Killer Bees, like fifty other shark movies

The Jurassic Park 3 plot (specifically 3): There's an island or otherwise isolated wilderness (jungle, cave, mountain, whatever) where a monster or species of monster lives. A group of people become trapped on this island/etc. and are picked off one by one by the monsters as they seek a way to escape. Examples: Raptor Island, Pterodactyl, Blood Monkey, Crocodile 2: Death Roll, Centipede!

Hell's Paradise hits the JP3 plot perfectly. The premise is basic: 10 death row inmates and 10 executioners are sent to an island where the elixir of life is said to be. The inmate who brings back the elixir alive will receive a pardon from the shogun, but of course the island is crawling with dangerous monsters and the 20 characters are rapidly whittled down as they fight to survive.

This is my kind of story. I love it.

Compared to the obscenely high production values of Chainsaw Man and Dandadan, Hell's Paradise looks significantly cheaper, which only emphasizes its B-movie feel. There's also a genericness to the character designs that gives the proper suggestion of disposability. I've found that as anime character designs become more complex and florid, the writer becomes more reluctant to kill them off, as if doing so would be wasteful of the effort that went into the design. (Look at something like My Hero Academia, which flirts so frequently with having a dark and edgy turn, but cannot bring itself to axe even one of the 100 irrelevant-but-colorful blorbos blorbing around in the background.)

There is some similarity to Chainsaw Man in this regard, which also gives its characters anonymizing and generic black suits and is also willing to kill them at leisure. But most similar to Chainsaw Man, and in this way also sharing some DNA with the competing Dandadan evolutionary branch, is role of women in the story. Gabimaru is a criminal, and the female executioner assigned to him, Sagiri, holds complete legal power over his life, similar to the subordinate nature of Denji to Makima. The power imbalance is emphasized by their designs, with Sagiri being roughly a head taller than Gabimaru (who looks like a dead ringer for Near from Death Note, incidentally). However, Hell's Paradise is not particularly obsessed with male subordination and emasculation, the way Chainsaw Man and Dandadan are. It is shown early that, although Sagiri is capable of killing the otherwise-indestructable Gabimaru, he is still a superior fighter to her, and her actual level of control over him is dubious at best; eventually he outright ditches her and goes off on his own adventure. Ironically, the lack of dominating power Sagiri exhibits in comparison to Makima or Dandadan's Momo allows her to be a more dynamic character in her own right; rather than a static force who exists solely for the male lead to bounce against, she has her own issues and struggles that she overcomes mostly independent of Gabimaru. In a surprising turn, the final battle of the anime is spearheaded by Sagiri, while Gabimaru is off somewhere else mowing down fodder. (This shift in focus also sets up an effective twist that calls into question everything the viewer knows about Gabimaru and his ad nauseum-repeated motivation.) This is not necessarily a comparative value judgment; though static, Makima is undeniably iconic and leaves a much bigger impact. But Sagiri's dynamism contributes to Hell's Paradise having a different feel when it comes to its perspective on gender.

At the same time, Hell's Paradise's much more serious tone compared to Chainsaw Man does not indicate a difference in preoccupation with emotional sincerity. While in Chainsaw Man, Denji frequently undercuts moments of serious emotion with humor, Hell's Paradise maintains this same idea of emotional detachment even without it. Gabimaru is known as "The Hollow," which refers to his status as an emotionless killer; the first episode revolves around his emotionless response to his own execution as he repeatedly tells himself he doesn't care if he lives or dies. Rather than irreverence, Hell's Paradise uses apathy to engage with the same theme, as Gabimaru is gradually redeemed due to his status as Wife Guy (I need to get the elixir so I can go home to my wife!). (As a side note, the existence of this wife is a definitive rejection of the emasculation of Chainsaw Man and Dandadan.) This struggle is rendered in a simple, perhaps overly simple, fashion, with Gabimaru imagining his emotionally-encouraging wife as more-or-less an angel on his shoulder while the master who trained him to kill remorselessly appears as a devil. There is a twist at the end of the anime that throws all of this into question in a way that is highly salient to the theme of apathy-versus-sincerity, but given this review is kind of a recommendation for people to watch the show, I won't discuss it.

It is this idea of sincerity in the face of emotional detachment that pervades Chainsaw Man and both of Fujimoto's acolyte's works, the most common fixation I can find between all three. Compared to the cripplingly earnest protagonists of shounen past (Luffy, Goku, Naruto, Deku), it gives this Fujimoto brand of shounen a distinct flavor, one perhaps perfectly attuned to these deeply media-savvy authors and their equally media-savvy internet age audiences. Once you're writing the manga equivalent of a SciFi Channel movie, or perhaps Sadako vs. Kayako, you're necessarily a little emotionally detached, no?

Chapter 15: Solo Leveling (anime)

For a long time, artists have experimented with phenomenology, or how art is changed by the way a person experiences the art. In visual arts, phenomenological experiences are usually achieved with optical effects, where art looks different when viewed from different angles, with ultimate results that are, in my opinion, gimmicky. But as a concept, I always felt phenomenology could find new artistic life in the medium of video games. Even in the most basic, non-narrative video games -- say, for example, the original Super Mario Bros. -- the way the player plays the game crafts a narrative experience. Mario can move carefully or aggressively, slowly or quickly, exploring for secrets or barreling to the end; he can die many times or none. However the game is played, it manufactures a "personality" for the character Mario unique to each player. In that interplay between the contributions of a game's creator and player, video games become a wholly unique art form.

Yet, as video games developed, and other art forms have retroactively become influenced by video games, I wonder if the real outcome of phenomenology in games has been an increasing tilt toward myopic individual artistic experience, or solipsism.

In my review of Sword Art Online, I mentioned that Solo Leveling's properly translated title is "Only I Level Up," which perfectly encapsulates the solipsistic focus of this genre of Gamer fiction. It is not simply about being powerful, it is about being the only one who is powerful. In Solo Leveling, this point is made at the end of the second episode, when protagonist Jinwoo receives a game prompt to become a "Player." As he is the only Player, every other character is necessarily a non-Player, or in Gamer lingo, an NPC.

I find something admirable about the nakedness with which Only I Level Up cuts to the quick. The most frustrating aspect of Sword Art Online as a viewing experience is how it attempts to hide its solipsistic power fantasy. The singleminded focus the show has on Kirito's power as the only power that matters undercuts everything else SAO claims to be, whether that's a tense death game, a heartfelt romance, or a story about the legitimacy of online community. Only I Level Up dispenses with pretense; its true face is right there in the title.

To frame it another way, I once watched Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol, the first film in Late Tom Cruise's career as a psychopathic do-my-own-stuntsman, where the core appeal of a Tom Cruise film is to see what death-defying feat the actor pulls off. And, yes, the stunts Tom Cruise performs are spectacular to watch. The problem is that these stunts comprise, collectively, 10-20 minutes of a film that is well over 2 hours. The rest of the film is mired in tedious plot, weak stabs at character drama, banal comic relief -- all the things a Hollywood movie is "supposed to have," even if they are not the core appeal of the film at all. Because of this, I was much more impressed by The Raid, an Indonesian action movie that excises nearly all plot and character to provide 90 minutes of nonstop action, or Mad Max: Fury Road, a film that is accurately described as a two-hour car chase.

Only I Level Up reaches a similar level of efficiency as it pushes Jinwoo from encounter to encounter. The loop is simple: Jinwoo is too weak, gets pushed around, levels up, wins, and the moment he wins the story already has a new stronger adversary waiting to appear. All other characters are either helpful assistants/helpless innocents Jinwoo has to protect, enemies to overcome, or, in the case of the show's brief cutaways to other powerful figures in-universe, power goals that Jinwoo is striving toward (and will ultimately exceed). The last category, though seemingly the most extraneous, is pivotal for providing context to just how strong Jinwoo is, what exactly it means when his numbers go up, and also for fueling the core grievance of weakness that makes this show so tastelessly indulgent: "Look at these rich, strong, beautiful people at the top. Why shouldn't I have what they have?" Though this is a Japanese anime, it's an adaptation of a Korean manwha, and the class envy so prominent in other Korean popular works like Parasite and Squid Game manifests here too. The S-rank Hunters that Jinwoo is leveling toward are suited executives in penthouses, people who own companies and walk around in sharp suits, while Jinwoo starts the story nearly getting killed just to make ends meet. The show's power fantasy is thus not simply about getting stronger, but about class inversion; Jinwoo's first ally is a rich corporate heir who becomes Jinwoo's drudge laborer (carrying equipment, mining loot with a pickax) and gleefully calls Jinwoo "boss." There's a scene I can only describe as "job interview revenge porn" where a suited executive, noticing Jinwoo's hidden talent, attempts to headhunt him with a lucrative contract; Jinwoo effortlessly turns the tables, reveals he's worth more than the interviewer's entire company, and cons the interviewer into paying him obscene amounts of money for nothing. Despite being humiliated, the interviewer leaves happy because Jinwoo gave him his contact info -- a direct line to Jinwoo is just that valuable.

The flipside of the class envy power fantasy is the humiliation Jinwoo suffers before his ascent to the top. In true solipsistic fashion, just as his strength is ultimately superlative, so is his initial weakness; he is nicknamed, no joke, "Mankind's Weakest Hunter." The early episodes are rife with masochistic internal monologues emphasizing again and again this weakness, even at inappropriate times. When Jinwoo sees a living statue cut a guy in half, his immediate thought is "That guy was a D rank, and he was killed in one hit... what will it do to me, who is a lowly and pathetic E rank?" My guy, it'll do exactly the same thing. Since the statues can annihilate anyone regardless of rank, they're actually an equalizer as far as Jinwoo is concerned, but Jinwoo still has to belabor his weakness. It's all in the service of breeding resentment toward the unfairness of Jinwoo's situation, which makes his later ascendance more cathartic. Sword Art Online also pulled this bullshit, though in a different way, since SAO had a fanfic-like squeamishness toward ever showing Kirito in any sort of weakened state. Instead, after Kirito defeats a boss, everyone baselessly calls him a cheater (sorry, beater). The baselessness is the point. It's not fair they called him a beater! It's not fair! It's not fair! It's not fair!

Obviously, this mindset is puerile, both in SAO and OILU, and in all the endless imitators of their ilk. The more interesting question is: How did we get here? How has this become the face of Gamer fiction?

In my Sword Art Online review, I framed the ascendance of SAO in 2012 as a byproduct of a longstanding culture-wide sneering at video games, emphasized by Roger Ebert's declaration that video games could never be art, but also demonstrated by the dismissive and insincere way video games were adapted into film during the preceding two decades. Either you got silly children's movies (Spy Kids 3D, The Wizard) or hysterectomy-like disembowelments where a D-list director's vanity project wore the original material's skin Buffalo Bill-style (Resident Evil 2002, Super Mario Bros. 1993). One has to go all the way back to 1982's Tron to find a film that treated the concept of video games with any sort of respect, and that was a film from the teenager-driven arcade era, before Nintendo indelibly associated the medium with kids toys.

In this milieu, the Gamers were being humiliated. Their hobby, their passion, the guiding focus of their nascent online communities and identities, was kid stuff, nerd stuff, not worth shit in the culture at large. It's no surprise that Gamers would glom onto media that tapped into their feelings of resentment. Kirito is a real-world misfit who is all-powerful in the game world. The virtual world is presented as a location of power inversion, where the weak becomes strong, similar to the class inversion that guides Solo Leveling -- and this correlates to the idea that the Gamer in real life is a humiliated underclass.

Yet, there is a crucial difference between Sword Art Online and Solo Leveling: Solo Leveling doesn't take place in a virtual world.

One of the few elements of SAO I actually like is how it depicts Kirito in the real world. I mentioned before that the show is allergic to showing Kirito in any state of weakness, but this is only true in the game world. Kirito is never weak; Kazuto Kirigaya often is. The Aincrad arc ends with an emaciated, atrophied Kazuto weakly limping across a hospital; the next arc begins with Kazuto getting his ass beat in kendo by his little sister. The show's only exciting action scene comes at the end of the otherwise lifeless Alfheim arc and doesn't involve flashy magic or swordplay, but rather a tense and realistic Waffle House-style knifefight in a parking lot between Kazuto and Average Adult Male. Kirito is fully dependent on the virtual world for his power, which explains SAO's insistence on the virtual world being as legitimate as the real one: that way, Kirito can matter.

In its typical pretense-dispensing fashion, Only I Level Up instead drapes game logic on reality. Jinwoo's Gamer power is real-world power; leveling up gains him increased strength, money, and status in a recognizably modern Seoul, South Korea. This difference comes at the cost of the fantastical environments and paradise-like alternate reality so prominent in SAO. It's not that OILU is less of a Gamer work for it; its video game system is more fleshed-out and true to real video games than SAO's is, and it is at times comedically insightful about the modern video game landscape. (I laughed out loud when Jinwoo, rejecting a message prompting him to change class to Necromancer because it would screw up his build, immediately reconsiders when a FOMO-inducing follow-up message cryptically says "Are you sure? Necromancer is a hidden class.") But the video game system exists only as a system. There is no sense of place or worldbuilding, virtual or otherwise; dungeons are either draped on the real world or take place in generic caves and castles. The virtual world was paramount to SAO's themes and aesthetic. In 12 years, where has it gone?

The answer is more fundamental to the way people experience video games today, or even more broadly, how they experience the internet as a whole.

Communities on the early internet were typically niche and nerdy and existed in chatrooms and forums. The thing about chatrooms and forums is that, though digital, they embody a sense of place. (It's called a chatROOM for a reason.) A forum's structure is static, divided into boards and threads, and remains that way for each user who accesses it. For instance, everyone who goes on /vg/ at the same time will see the same messages. /vg/ exists independently of any one user, and will continue to exist even if individual users log off. Due to this consistency, the forum takes on a sense of place, like a building people can go into and leave at will. MMORPGs, the focus of Sword Art Online, add a visual component to this same idea. Everyone is in the same World of Warcraft. Though they may do different things in it, go to different cities or dungeons, play in different ways, the World itself retains its shape and character.

By contrast, the way most people interact with the internet today is via social media, which eschews spatial consistency in favor of individualized "feeds" of algorithm-driven (or user-curated) content. When you go on Twitter, the content you are presented with is a wholly unique combination, yours alone. Your Twitter is different from your friends' Twitter, even if -- sharing similar interests -- your algorithms have presented you with some overlapping content.

Due to this individualized transience (this phenomenology, let's say), Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are not "places" the way forums or MMORPGs are. You couldn't describe them as a building, or depict them as a mansion the way Julian Dibbell does an old Multi-User Dungeon in A Rape in Cyberspace. And the removal of this sense of place erodes the feeling of community present in old forums and MMORPGs, where there is a static world outside the individual and thus an external existence toward which a person can feel a sense of duty or responsibility. Similarly, social media promotes a greater sense of inequality and anti-democracy. If you post on a forum, your post will exist at the top of the board, at least until other people post and push it down. Every poster has the same opportunity to be seen and interacted with. In social media, your capacity to be heard when you make your shouts in the dark is entirely tied to the algorithm's decision on whether to present your shout to enough individualized feeds.

Solo Leveling is Gamer fiction for the social media age. Whereas SAO, and its significantly more community-minded predecessor .hack//Sign, are deeply concerned with online environments as a distinct place, Solo Leveling sees its game environments as nebulous, pseudo-spatial pockets that exist briefly and are then destroyed. Jinwoo displays nonexistent interest or curiosity in these environments as anything beyond leveling challenges, compared to Kirito, to whom the world of Aincrad holds deep significance. Likewise, Jinwoo is distinguished by his ordinary clothing; all of his gear is, for seemingly no reason, invisible. (Everyone else in setting wears ridiculous fantasy armor, often to the point of being a joke.) In Solo Leveling, video games are only important as a determiner of skill, a way to establish superiority over others; anything suggestive of an alternative world or culture or even aesthetic is outright rejected. Hence why so many of its enemies and environments, scant as they are, are modeled on Dark Souls, a game that has become synonymous with hardcore challenge (while still being a single-player game that the developer has designed for you to win). MMORPGs, and online communities in general, are passe. The online experience now is individualized, perfectly phenomenological, each in their own bubble, the solipsistic hero of their own story. Everyone else is an NPC.

Likewise, Solo Leveling is not an escapist fantasy, the way SAO or any isekai is. Perhaps there's something quintessentially Japanese about the isekai: an appeal specifically to the otaku NEET who has retreated from society at large. It invites its audience to forsake the real world in favor of a fantastical one, compared to the Korean class consciousness that stages its definitive power fantasy in reality. And as the internet and the real world have continued to blend together in real life, to increasingly bizarre political and economic results, I wonder if Solo Leveling's real world adaptation of the isekai formula might wind up being significantly more prominent in the pop cultural landscape moving forward. Solo Leveling is already the hottest show airing today; I expect to see high-profile imitators soon.

Chapter 16: The Making Of: Fargo

I. This Is Your Brain On Anime

I started writing Fargo at the lowest point in my life. I'd been watching anime.

For years, I'd managed to not watch anime. Sure, there was Pokémon as a kid, and to a lesser extent Digimon and Yu-Gi-Oh. And as a preteen cinephile who followed the Oscars, Spirited Away's Best Animated win got me to pick it up on DVD. I'd later seen a handful of anime films that similarly carried cinephile credibility: other Miyazakis (Nausicaä, Princess Mononoke), Akira, Ghost in the Shell, Paprika. But I had always refused to watch *anime* anime. You know what I mean. The seasonal stuff.

In 2007, the final fringe of Wild West internet before Facebook changed everything, seasonal anime was exploding in popularity. A lot of this was due to sheer accessibility. No longer did you need to find a VHS release of some OVA or hope for a play on Adult Swim. Fan subbing and dubbing communities rendered more-or-less anything showing up in Japan available to worldwide audiences via a nifty new site called YouTube. This level of immediacy, combined with the niche tight-knit communities that governed the internet prior to social media, made following seasonal anime a social event. Week by week people posted reactions, reviews, theories, and memes, driving up engagement and rapidly expanding anime's reach as an entertainment medium.

The big breakthrough title in this regard is 2006's The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya, a massively influential show that changed the look and feel of mainstream anime for years. But my first brush with the anime community came via the following year's Lucky Star, by the same studio and with the same moe stylings. As I prowled the boards of Nintendo's official forum, Nsider, and its successor Nsider 2 (after Nintendo, in characteristically Nintendo fashion, annihilated the site from existence without warning), I found myself constantly bumping into people posting pictures of these four hyper-cutesy anime girls with candy-colored hair. They were everywhere. Teenage me took one look and came to an unshakeable and incontrovertible conclusion:

Only *girls* would watch this!

Saccharine aesthetic? Lack of plot? And, god, *all* of the characters are girls? Girl show. No doubt in my mind. Nah, none of this "anime" crap for me. I'll stick with *real* media, like Leprechaun 4: In Space (which I eagerly stayed up until midnight to watch on the SciFi Channel) and Eli Roth's splatterhouse classic Cabin Fever.

Then some devious motherfucker, I don't even remember who they were, told me something truly insidious, something that would haunt me for years to come. "Hey," they said, "what if there was a show like Lucky Star except they all killed each other with knives? Wouldn't that be awesome?"

And they recommended me Higurashi no Naku Koro ni.

(They showed me an AMV with a similar feel to this one to entice me. Unfortunately that original AMV is lost to history.)

I wound up bingeing the entire 50-episode show, in 10-minute chunks on YouTube, across a single 24-hour period. I couldn't stop myself. It was the same obsessive consumption that would infest me when I discovered Homestuck five years later. Obsession so intense that after I finished it, I immediately went crawling in search of more anime and devoured Death Note in another 24-hour span.

Emerging, blinking, back into the sun, I looked around and realized I couldn't go on like this. I couldn't plunge headlong, headless, into anime. I could not become the dreaded "weeb."

So I cut off anime. No more. As quickly as my drop into the abyss began, I ended it. And a few years later, when I went to college, I cut off the internet as a social experience altogether. No more forums, no more chatrooms. I was an adult. Time to do adult stuff, like read classic literature, write novels, and play League of Legends for 10 hours every day.

Despite how it sounds, college was a great time in my life. I enjoyed learning, enjoyed going to classes, enjoyed reading textbooks, enjoyed writing essays. And I was good at it, very very good—even with the 10-hour League sessions. I felt no need to reconsider anime.

Then I graduated.

Graduating college was like slamming face-first into a brick wall. My entire life until then had seemed to be building toward something. Academia is a series of stepping stones to more prestigious levels of academia (middle school! high school! college!) with a golden gleaming Adulthood at the end of the line, omnipresent. And I did it! My success in college got me a job, eight hours in an office five days a week, much better than anyone else in my post-recession cohort. Adulthood accomplished.

It was miserable. That gleaming paradise Adulthood was a sham. I was doing less work and less difficult work than at college but they were demanding I spend way more time doing it. All sense of fulfilment vanished. There was no longer progress, no bigger and better things on the horizon. I had nothing to hope for. I'd achieved the thing people tend to hope for, and THIS WAS IT. The notion that consumed me was that my life had slipped into overtime, a dead zone past its expiration date, treading water in misery. I also had a 90-minute daily commute in SoCal traffic.

My free time was cut down to a fraction of what it was in college, so no more 10-hour League sessions. I tried to maintain my schedule of reading 50 pages and writing 2,000 words a day, but I no longer had the time or energy, and it didn't make sense *why* I didn't have the time or energy, because I was doing things that were so trivial and easy compared to my college courseload. Work was an arbitrary time-wasting machine with nothing ahead except 40 more years of work. I wanted to die.

Despairing, seeking nothing save relief, I turned back to anime.

関根
ひさ子
遊佐
DJ Khaled
入江

In a Skype groupchat I wound up in, there were two teenagers with their fingers on the pulse of the latest anime buzz. They were my guides back into this wretched world. First, I was served up Fate/Zero, which I consumed quickly (though not with the same leisure time to afford a 24-hour binge) before asking for seconds. I was then recommended Angel Beats. Okay, I said, typing Angel Beats into YouTube, which seven years after Higurashi I still assumed was the main way to watch anime. The first result I got was called Bludgeoning Angel Dokuro-chan. Aha, I said. Angel Beats, Bludgeoning Angel, I know what this is. It's an alternate translation of the title.

It's the kind of comedy of errors that could only happen to someone who timewarped directly from 2007 to 2014 with complete ignorance of the intervening years. Angel Beats, of course, is a tearjerking Key show about students in the afterlife coming to grips with their tragic deaths. Bludgeoning Angel Dokuro-chan is about an angel repeatedly bludgeoning a boy because otherwise he will grow up and create a world where every woman stops aging at 10 years old—a so-called "Lolicon Paradise." (As someone who reads classic lit, seeing the bizarre cross-cultural route Nabokov's novel has taken always amuses me.)

When I started Bludgeoning Angel, I was a little uncertain whether I had the right show. Its tone didn't quite jive with Bingus and Bungus in the Skype chat. Hesitantly, I decided to react in chat to the first thing that happens in the show. "Haha," I said. "The angel really just killed that guy."

In a sadistic twist of fate, this is somehow exactly how Angel Beats begins, too. My friends responded as though everything was totally normal, and I figured I must have the right show after all. Thus, I wound up watching the entirety of Bludgeoning Angel Dokuro-chan, which becomes increasingly surreal, violent, and depraved as it goes on, and only learned my mistake after the final episode. That show probably tainted me forever.

Afterward, I watched the real Angel Beats (in my depressive stupor, it made me cry), Mirai Nikki, and the "only for girls" Lucky Star (it also made me cry). I was getting hooked. It was only a matter of time before Bingus and Bungus recommended me a true landmine. They did. "I think you might like this," Bungus said, tepidly, not exactly sure.

"Hit me," I said.

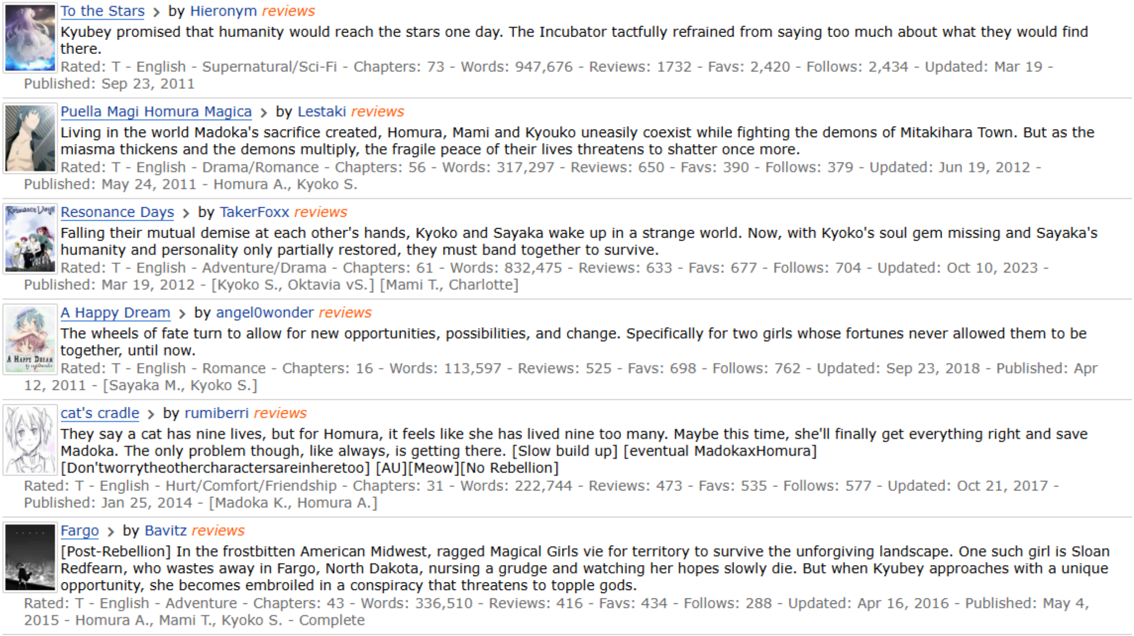
II. Puella Magi Madoka Magica

The League of Legends-induced timewarp that imprisoned me in college had the side effect of allowing me, in early 2015, to watch Puella Magi Madoka Magica completely blind. I hadn't the faintest idea what it was about, or even a hint of its reputation. Bungus said, "Watch it," and I watched it.

Believe it or not, this blindness backfired. Despite the sanctity people place on spoilers, expectations are a crucial component of the narrative experience. Unaware of what I was watching, I was not nearly as impacted by what I saw. The much-famed Episode 3 twist was nothing to me. Why? I was certain, absolutely certain, the death wouldn't stick. I felt extremely confident either Madoka or Sayaka would make a wish to bring Mami back to life.

Nonetheless, the show grew on me. The cute exterior steadily transforming grimmer was a Ratatouille flashback to Higurashi; there's something so delicious about how jaggedly the hyper-poppy upbeat OP jumpscares in the middle of increasingly hopeless situations during the show's back half. After 12 episodes and a movie I needed more. Not more anime. More Madoka Magica.

I didn't get it from the spinoffs, of which there were several even then, most of which I knew nothing about. Instead I went looking for it on more familiar terrain, another relic of my 2007 timewarp: fanfiction-dot-net. This is where people go to engage with media fandom, right? I hit up the Madoka page, sorted content by number of reviews, and got this:



To the Stars > by Hieronym *reviews*
Kyubey promised that humanity would reach the stars one day. The Incubator tactfully refrained from saying too much about what they would find there.
Rated: T - English - Supernatural/Sci-Fi - Chapters: 73 - Words: 947,676 - Reviews: 1732 - Favs: 2,420 - Follows: 2,434 - Updated: Mar 19 - Published: Sep 23, 2011

Puella Magi Homura Magica > by Lestaki *reviews*
Living in the world Madoka's sacrifice created, Homura, Mami and Kyouko uneasily coexist while fighting the demons of Mitakihara Town. But as the miasma thickens and the demons multiply, the fragile peace of their lives threatens to shatter once more.
Rated: T - English - Drama/Romance - Chapters: 56 - Words: 317,297 - Reviews: 650 - Favs: 390 - Follows: 379 - Updated: Jun 19, 2012 - Published: May 24, 2011 - Homura A., Kyoko S.

Resonance Days > by TakerFoxx *reviews*
Falling their mutual demise at each other's hands, Kyoko and Sayaka wake up in a strange world. Now, with Kyoko's soul gem missing and Sayaka's humanity and personality only partially restored, they must band together to survive.
Rated: T - English - Adventure/Drama - Chapters: 61 - Words: 832,475 - Reviews: 633 - Favs: 677 - Follows: 704 - Updated: Oct 10, 2023 - Published: Mar 19, 2012 - [Kyoko S., Oktavia vS.] [Mami T., Charlotte]

A Happy Dream > by angel0wonder *reviews*
The wheels of fate turn to allow for new opportunities, possibilities, and change. Specifically for two girls whose fortunes never allowed them to be together, until now.
Rated: T - English - Romance - Chapters: 16 - Words: 113,597 - Reviews: 525 - Favs: 698 - Follows: 762 - Updated: Sep 23, 2018 - Published: Apr 12, 2011 - [Sayaka M., Kyoko S.]

cat's cradle > by rumiberri *reviews*
They say a cat has nine lives, but for Homura, it feels like she has lived nine too many. Maybe this time, she'll finally get everything right and save Madoka. The only problem though, like always, is getting there. [Slow build up] [eventual MadokaxHomura] [Don'tworrytheothercharactersareinheretoo] [AU][Meow][No Rebellion]
Rated: T - English - Hurt/Comfort/Friendship - Chapters: 31 - Words: 222,744 - Reviews: 473 - Favs: 535 - Follows: 577 - Updated: Oct 21, 2017 - Published: Jan 25, 2014 - [Madoka K., Homura A.]

Fargo > by Bavitz *reviews*
[Post-Rebellion] In the frostbitten American Midwest, ragged Magical Girls vie for territory to survive the unforgiving landscape. One such girl is Sloan Redfearn, who wastes away in Fargo, North Dakota, nursing a grudge and watching her hopes slowly die. But when Kyubey approaches with a unique opportunity, she becomes embroiled in a conspiracy that threatens to topple gods.
Rated: T - English - Adventure - Chapters: 43 - Words: 336,510 - Reviews: 416 - Favs: 434 - Follows: 288 - Updated: Apr 16, 2016 - Published: May 4, 2015 - Homura A., Mami T., Kyoko S. - Complete

Well, sort of. Fargo wasn't there yet, obviously. The other five were, in this same order. I opened To the Stars, read a chapter or two, found it impossibly boring and nothing at all like the show, and discarded it. Resonance Days, A Happy Dream, and cat's cradle [sic] all looked like shipfics, which was not my speed. That left one fic, which I would read in one day home sick (legitimately) from work, one fic that would prove massively influential on the idea for Fargo I didn't yet have.

Puella Magi Homura Magica by Lestaki, despite its second-place position on this prestigious list (behind only a work once described by acclaimed guy-with-a-blog Eliezer Yudkowsky as the most prescient depiction of future warfare ever written), is a fanfic I have never heard anyone mention *once* in my now 10-year stint in the Madoka Magica trenches. Even in the subculture it is a blank of memory, which makes sense if you look at its publication and last updated dates. It came out May 24, 2011—barely a month after the show finished airing—and was unceremoniously abandoned, incomplete, little over a year later. It's easy to see the fic emerging in the frenzy of activity prompted by the show's immediate popularity, rising on the tide, and vanishing under the waves of works with more temporally dogged creators.

So what is it?

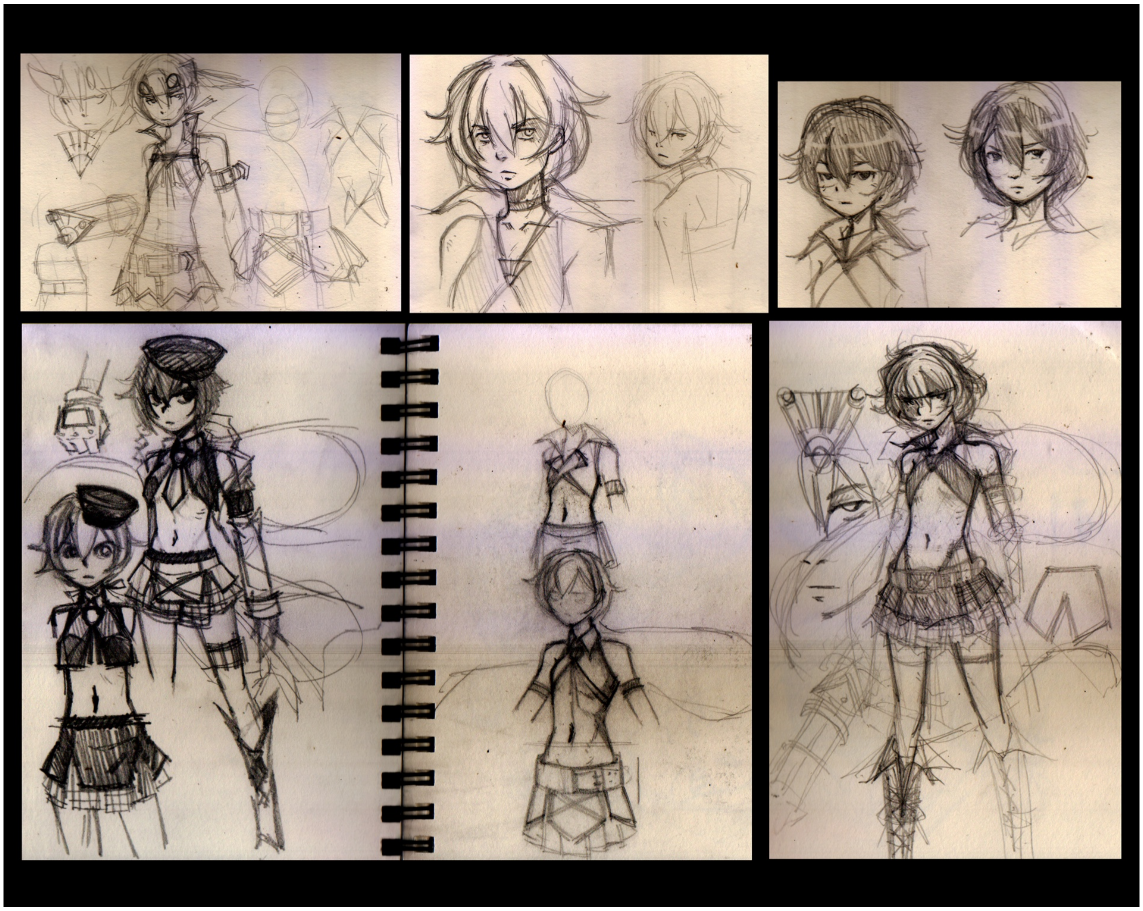
PMHM is a three-arc story set after the show (and ignoring, of course, Rebellion, which it predates). Its first arc focuses on the three-man band of Homura, Kyoko, and Mami as they prepare to fight against a "demon prince"—an exceptionally powerful, city-destroying wraith—that Kyubey predicts will be born in Mitakihara soon. The demon prince is so powerful that the trio cannot possibly defeat it on their own, causing them to soon be joined by a ragtag team of original characters, spinoff characters, and a contracting Hitomi. The squad butts heads, but ultimately manages to come together to destroy the demon prince when it appears.

The second arc revolves around an inter-city magical girl war. The Mitakihara girls, for reasons I don't fully remember, have to invade and defeat an OC magical girl warlord in charge of another city. Both sides amass allies until the final confrontation involves at least a hundred magical girls. At the end of the arc, the OC villain reveals she manufactured the war to put Homura in a situation where she would be forced to continually use her time-rewinding powers to save Kyoko and Mami (whom she has come to care for over the course of the story), which is part of the villain's plot to generate enough karmic potential that she can create a new Madoka-esque god. Homura is aware that every time she rewinds time, she is helping the villain usurp Madoka, so she's torn between saving her living friends and saving her conceptual girlfriend.

That's where the story abruptly ends, mired in a series of repetitive chapters where the villain keeps finding ways to kill Kyoko and/or Mami and forcing Homura to turn back time. (It seems the author trapped themselves in the concept of showing each timeline in detail and lost momentum fast.)

And that's where Fargo begins.

III. Williston



Fargo was not a conscious work. Unlike most of my fiction, it was not assiduously planned. It was not kicked around in my head for years before I started writing it. It was not drafted and redrafted. Fargo was a creature of instinct, and because of that even now I look at it with a certain sense of wonder. Both Chicago and Cleveland Quixotic originated with me examining Fargo, trying to see what made it so popular, and laboriously reengineering whatever I concluded was the cause (I was wrong both times).

It emerged in my head not as an idea, but a vibe. Frigid, frostbitten wasteland. A tough, take-no-bullshit magical girl, dead inside. She'd use a Gatling gun. Long brown coat.

I was 60,000 words into a draft of a story I'd been planning since I first read Homestuck in 2012, a story I was tentatively calling Soulstealer but would eventually call Modern Cannibals. But I didn't want to write it anymore. At work, I was still miserable. I wanted to write a work of misery. I wanted to write a miserable human being. I abandoned the Modern Cannibals draft despite how far along it was (I was at the scene where Z. rescues Kiki from Mitchum's party). I began, as if automatically, writing something else. It was the same surrender that had led me to anime in the first place. The path of emotional, intellectual least resistance.

It's probably because I was on this path that I wound up unconsciously borrowing so many structural and worldbuilding cues from Puella Magi Homura Magica, especially in the first arc, with the Williston archon substituted for the Mitakihara demon prince. It wasn't even a conscious decision to do what I had seen in PMHM; I didn't realize the overlap until later. I was putting onto page the last thing lodged in my brain, and that was it. At work, I'd recently learned about the homeless crisis in Williston due to the shale oil boom, and that wound up in the story too.

Basically every part of the first few chapters of Fargo manifested on the page without me having any idea what it would build to. When Kyubey told Sloan to go to Williston, I knew he was being deceptive, but I didn't know how, and certainly had not figured out his elaborate plot to defeat Homura yet. Ditto Omaha. Clair Ibsen as Sloan's detested rival was a name I flicked onto the page at random (combining Clair, the gym leader from Pokémon, with Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian playwright, because I figured a character from Minnesota should have a Scandinavian surname). The girl, unnamed, who scuffles with Sloan in Chapter 1 was not yet Anoka; I had no plans for her to reappear, nor plans to make her relevant to how the Williston archon was born. When writing Chapter 2, I had no conception of Delaney or Erika (another Pokémon gym leader) as characters until I started writing them, at which point their personalities emerged, fully-formed, all at once. I didn't know Delaney's backstory, only that she was suspicious.

What made Fargo work is that I very quickly figured this stuff out.

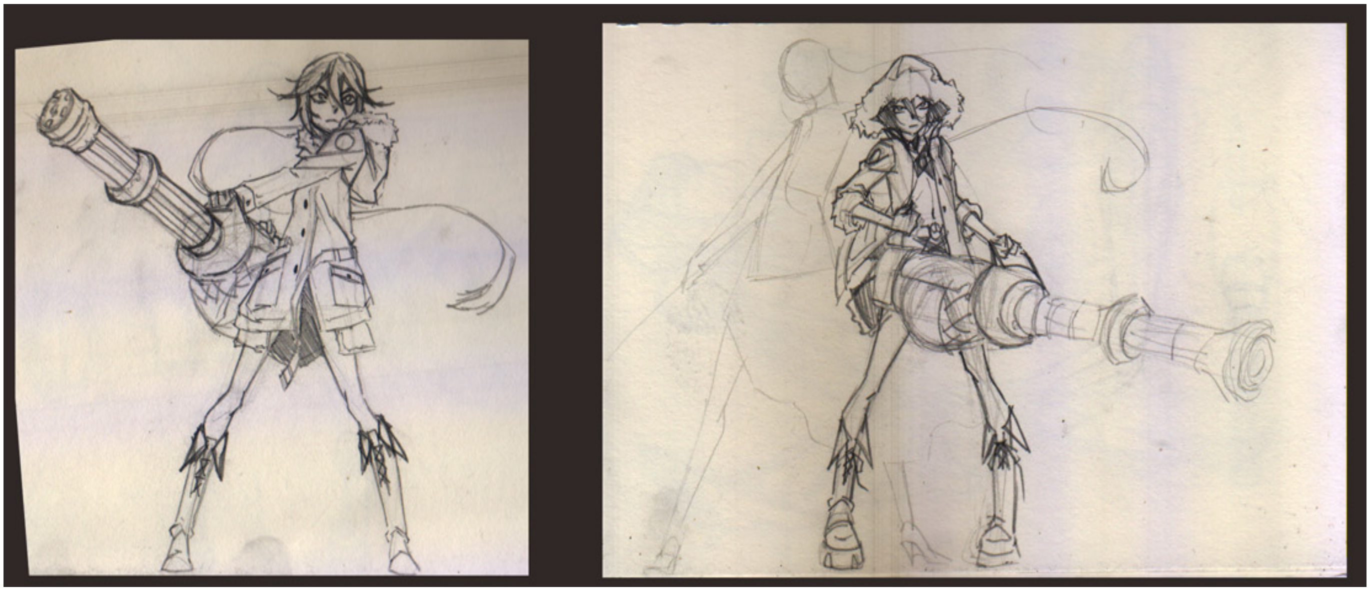
Throwing these ideas and characters onto the board was like putting myself in an escape room, and the challenge then became to figure out how everything slotted together. It was around Chapter 4—which I had written fully before I started posting the story, and which was about the time I realized I actually wanted to go through with what was starting to shape up as a long and ambitious work—that I started seeing the connective tissue. Kyubey's plot came into view, as well as Omaha's role in it. (Hence why Chapter 5 begins with a scene involving Homura.) I figured out Delaney's backstory, though I hadn't yet figured out how she was part of Kyubey's plot yet. The end of the first arc formed in my mind: Erika dead, Delaney alive, she and Sloan en route to Minneapolis to fight Clair. I had the beginnings of an idea how the second arc would go; there was the ghost of an idea for a third arc, but that made the story seem impossibly long, so I wrote with the belief everything would end with Clair. By the end of the arc, when I had started thinking about Clair's goons, I had the idea for Anoka, and incorporated her into the Williston archon's origin story.

I think there are still signs of lack of foresight. The actual plot of Fargo's first arc is like the plot of a Legend of Zelda game. Go to three different places, fight three bosses, then go to the final dungeon where the final boss awaits. What the characters actually do, narratively, is spin their wheels in endless action sequences; all sense of progression is driven by the slow unveiling of Delaney and Erika's backstories, which recontextualizes them as characters, as well as broadening hints toward Kyubey's plot. And Sloan's gradual recovery from the precipice of despair, of course.

That last one was a mirror of the author. Fargo was an immediate smash hit of the kind I had never seen before; I was getting two to three comments per chapter, and they were good comments, too. Before, I hadn't even been able to beg friends and family to read my novels. (I once described the plot of a pre-Bavitz novel to my grandmother; she said, "That doesn't sound any good at all.") I expected obscurity, an obscurity reflected by the aggressively anti-SEO title I decided on as a joke (Fargo being a movie I don't particularly like, and the only real overlap between that one and mine being neither is actually set in Fargo). Receiving any reception at all was a miracle.

At the same time, I moved closer to where I worked, killing my daily commute once and for all. Time, energy, and hope were surging back into me. The dream I had always harbored of being an internationally-renowned author seemed to be finally coming true. Everything was looking up. Riding this momentum, I no longer worried about the ambitious length of my story. It was worth it. I was in for the long haul.

IV. Minneapolis



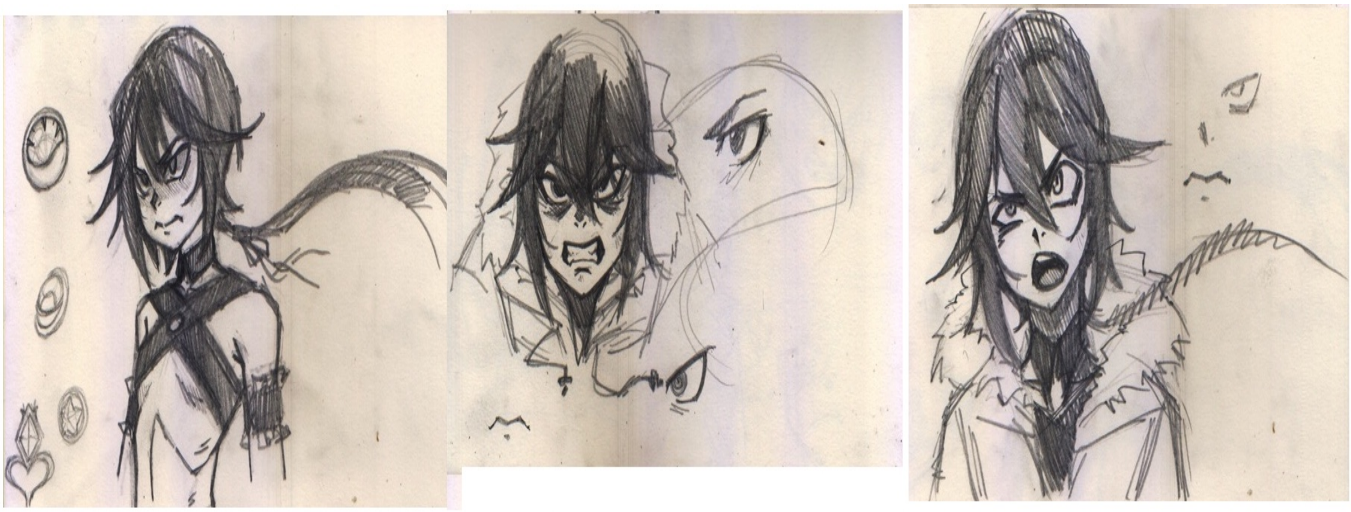
Clair's personality emerged as the natural foil to Sloan, the brutish, instinct-driven meathead: elegant, careful, intelligent, poised. It was my get-out-of-the-escape-room problem solving that led me to realize this made her similar to Kyubey himself; that connection inspired the plot twist that she was, in fact, a homunculus created by him, which turned into Delaney being a homunculus too. (In early Williston chapters, I repeatedly focused on Delaney's dead eyes to foreshadow her sociopathic turn; this pedestrian bit of description became eerily serendipitous for explaining how she changed her eye color with magic to hide its natural red.)

As an author, I myself was transitioning from Sloan-esque instinct to more careful and intelligent planning. I'd already come up with Anoka, but the other Minneapolis girls emerged in ways I thought would play well off of Clair, emphasizing her uncanny and aristocratic coldness. I entered the second arc with more elaborate plotting, where I would set up characters like chess pieces and knock them over in spectacular and fulfilling ways. It all centered around the Yaldabaoth fight, which was the first part of the second arc I came up with, in a first arc sense of unconsciousness: A massive monster of light, crawling across a city, chasing magical girls as they sped around in a car.

There were some speed bumps. This arc featured the only time while writing Fargo that I scrapped a scene and rewrote it; this being the Terminatrix's introduction, which originally showed her receiving her commission from Kyubey. I felt it was plodding and tedious compared to her current introduction, which remains highly popular. (As a side note, Puella Magi Homura Magica also includes a character whom Kyubey pays to kill magical girls he doesn't like.)

Otherwise, though, I was locked in. Everything just worked. I came up with an idea for a character or a plot twist and it made perfect sense with what I had already established. It was like magic. It was effortless. I was reading literature again, too, after a year away from it; my prose improved as a result. There is unparalleled exhilaration in growth. It was like academia all over again, where I learned new things day after day and always seemed to be ascending to some better place. I started imagining future greatness. It wouldn't stop here. Fargo was just the start. My next work would be even better, would be read by more people. (Modern Cannibals remained bouncing in the back of my mind.) It wouldn't be long before I was breaking out of the internet and into the real world. They'd be talking about me...

V. Mitakihara



Why did Puella Magi Madoka Magica mean so much to me?

Because, as I mentioned, it didn't leave an immediate impact. A lot of what I look at now as masterstroke storytelling—Mami's death, or Rebellion in general—I first watched insensible, uncomprehending, somewhat blandly being washed over. Only a few months prior I had watched Lucky Star, a work that would heavily inspire one of my future stories (Cockatiel x Chameleon), and was profoundly and immediately emotionally affected by it in a way I almost never am. I cried at its conclusion. There was something unbearable and tragic in the ending of such a nice world, no matter how inoffensive that ending was; in the banal high school life it depicted, I saw reflected what I had lost forever, been sealed away from on this side of Adulthood.

(Which explains why my mindset on it changed so radically from when I was an actual high schooler, its ostensible target demographic.)

I didn't have a similar reaction to Madoka Magica. I liked it, for sure, but it was not an emotionally harrowing experience for me. Yet it grew in my mind, in ways I didn't consciously understand. It kept crawling, kept forcing me to think about it, until there was no option but for me to drop what I was doing and write over 300,000 words of fan fiction for it.

I never figured out the answer until a few years later, when I chanced upon a post someone made on Tumblr. "Okay," it said, in typical I-know-everything tone, "but can any of you tell me a single THEME in Madoka Magica?"

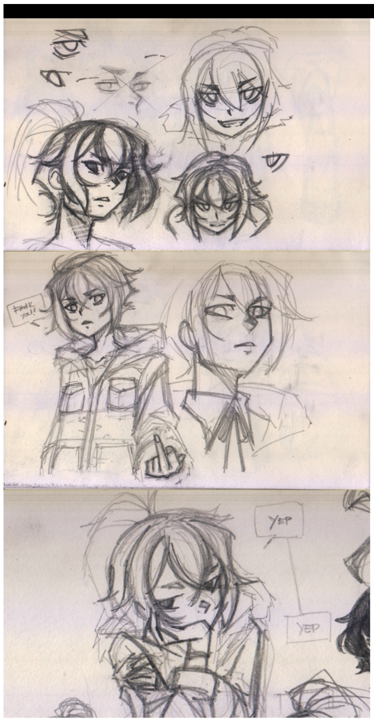
It made me think. What IS Madoka Magica about, beyond a plot-and-character level? The story, at least in the show, is so lean and tight that it lacks a lot of obvious signposting in this regard. It's easy to look at Madoka Magica and see a sharp story founded on a series of slick twists, with a banal hope versus despair angle for a bit of emotional punchiness. Regardless of whether you agree with that assessment or not, it certainly couldn't have been what I saw in it to make me so obsessed, right?

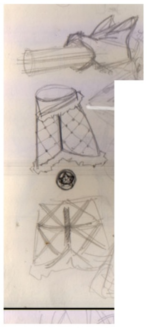
It's not even like Madoka Magica is a story that lends itself to fanfic, past the level of shipfic or slice of life AU. Its extreme economy of characters renders it vitriolic to expansion. Everything that matters in the world of Madoka Magica is happening in Mitakihara to five specific people. The system extends beyond them but in a useless way; magical girls in Osaka or Russia or Fargo exist, but they are doomed to irrelevance, doomed to die pointlessly. Every canonical Madoka spinoff falls into this same pratfall; the best involve the backstories of the main cast or past Homura timeloops, the rest fail to rise above sideshow.

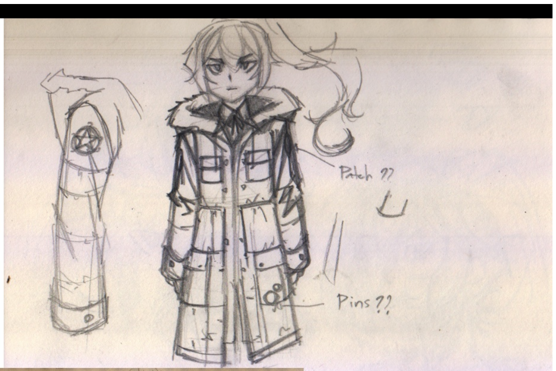
I think what gnawed at me, what made me brute force a new narrative into this story that doesn't need one, was the reflection I saw in it. The Lucky Star kids with all their hopes and dreams and pleasant optimism tossed into the clanking reality of Adulthood, forced to work jobs with no point and no hope until they finally just died. The more I rewatch the show, the more I become consumed by a socioeconomic reading of it, the financial disparities between the characters (Hitomi, free from all of this, is rich; Madoka, the redemptive savior, is too—while Mami is faking it and Sayaka is shabbily middle class in a foreboding and monotone apartment complex, consumed by dreams of an upper-class recital she once saw), the conversations Madoka has with her parents (who tell her again and again what "being an adult is like," only to then give advice that is utterly unhelpful), the emotionless and mercenary way Kyubey dissolves all meaning in the universe to a system of pluses and minuses.

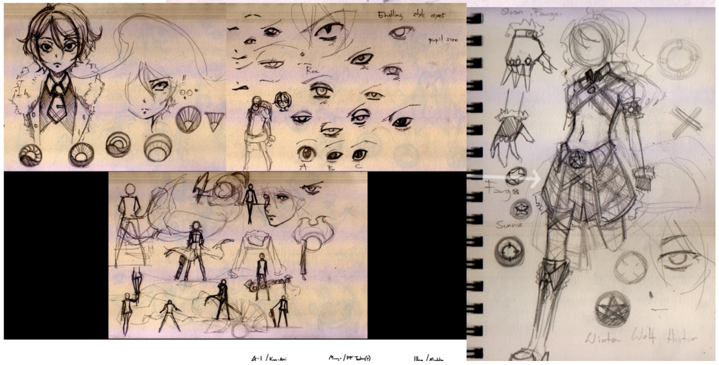
Unconsciously, the socioeconomic aspects of the original story emerged in Fargo with even more exaggeration: Sloan is introduced in terms of her outrageous poverty, everyone else is on the economic fringes (prostitutes, drug dealers), and only Clair lives in a state of financial stability. (There's a sideplot in the Minneapolis arc where she plans to gentrify the city by rooting out its Ramseys, all in service of creating a model community to show off online.) Sloan pursues monomaniacal revenge for a betrayal she suffered at Clair's hands, but the crux of the reader's disdain for Clair lies in the unctuousness of her wealth and the disposable way she treats her employees. Plus, there's the plaid-shirted workers who osmose around Williston, silent as they fall into pits and keel over dead on the streets, parts of an economy founded on resource extraction not all too dissimilar from Kyubey's own system (though he, ironically, wonders at one point why humans would get so up in arms over such a "primitive energy source").

Sloan is a have-not and Clair is a have, so there's an innate sympathy for her in favor of her archnemesis, on top of the innate sympathy readers have for protagonists over antagonists. This all sets the stage for what is in my opinion the best part of Fargo, its third arc, where the story's thematic elements come together in more interesting and subversive ways. It's all predicated on Sloan's quest for revenge having been faulty from the start, her motives much less ironclad than they first appear and her bullheadedness making her the perfect pawn in Kyubey's schemes.









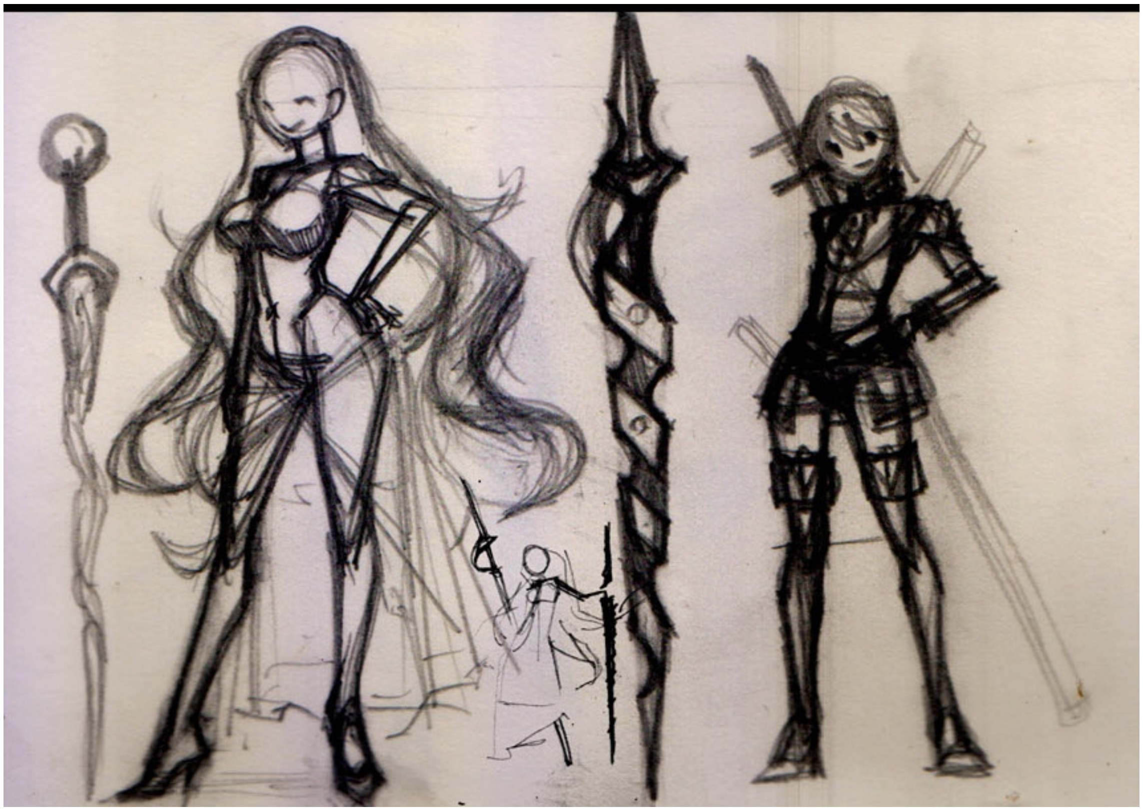
The best aspect of the third arc is how Sloan is irrelevant. Seeing the outcome of her self-absorption cuts her off at the knees, and she has to grapple with the fact that the world is a lot bigger than her immediate purview. Ultimately, her role in the climax is tangential, a singular meaningful wrench tossed into a much larger machine that manages to prompt an unexpected positive outcome. She barely even factors into the penultimate chapter. (Fun fact: Chapter 41, Love, with its 10+ character POVs, was both directly inspired by Ulysses but also by a comment I got during the first arc hoping for more POVs with drastically different writing styles.) The emotional power of Sloan's arc stems from her coming to peace with her own inadequacies, both morally and in terms of greatness, and in that way she wound up being a mirror for me to the end, didn't she? In academia, I believed I was going to be someone important, and much of the existential dread of my workplace came from its boundless mediocrity. Fargo allowed me to come to terms with that mediocrity, both in the story and without; though much of that "coming to terms" was based on the new delusion that my popular fanfic would spur me on to mainstream literary success, a delusion I would not need to reckon with until after the minimal readership for my next work, Modern Cannibals.

This also explains my decision to frame Madoka's magical girl heaven as a giant office job. Though I would also defend that decision from a textual standpoint, given the esteem Madoka has for her company suit mother, and how she visualizes her mother as an example of "successful" adulthood in contrast to the cruel failure of the magical girl system.

Lastly, there's the instinctual level of things. All this socioeconomic stuff was not explicitly clear to me even as I was writing it; I didn't consciously think "Oh gotta make this about having a job." It just came out that way, an expelling of the self, the same way I unconsciously modeled some of Fargo's structure and worldbuilding on Homura Magica. The same way, I suppose, I modeled the emotional thrust of the story on Madoka Magica. A bleak downward spiral of misery and death culminating in a sudden and unexpected redemption. When, as a teen, I watched Higurashi, I remember being bowled over by its unexpectedly happy ending. I'd never seen anything like it, not in something otherwise so macabre and pessimistic. As a teen, I enjoyed that ending as a subversion of expectations, an original and novel idea. As an adult, watching Madoka Magica, it held a lot more emotional potency, and that potency was, like everything else, unconsciously replicated in Fargo.

When I wrote that final chapter, I remember being utterly drained. The finish line was in sight and I had been doing this for a year, for 300,000 words, far longer than any other story I'd ever written until then. I remember feeling like my prose was sloppy, like I was stumbling right at the end, like the chapter was no good. But the reviews were overwhelmingly positive, and now when I reread that chapter I see nothing wrong with its prose or technique. Even stripped bare, exhausted, that unconscious emotional core remained, and maybe that sense of being stripped down, so that nothing else is there but it, is what gives it so much power.

VI. Retrospective



There are flaws in Fargo. The prose is not always my best, and there are stretches that are clunky. In Chapter 3 I wrote a 5,000-word fight scene, and became possessed by the notion that all subsequent fights must be even longer, which led to some truly overlong combat sequences. There are a lot of continuity errors and mistakes, some small, some embarrassing (there's a scene where Clair tortures Delaney with boiling water and it's clear I had never boiled water before). And, significant to me, there is a lack of thematic complexity compared to my other works, with long parts of the story that aren't interested in meaning anything at all, at least overtly.

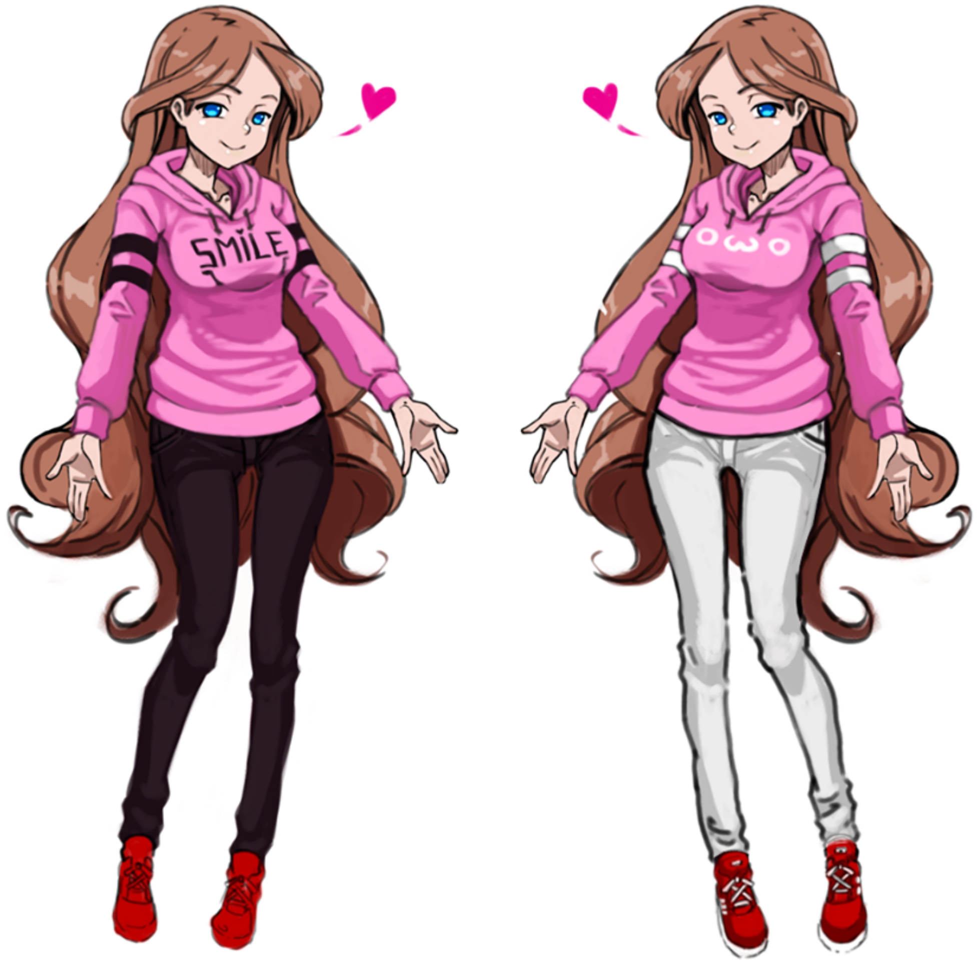
That last part might not really be a flaw, though. There is a singleminded focus on plot and character in Fargo, prompted perhaps by the unconscious way I wrote it, that was a major driver of its success. Nobody has ever complained about the continuity errors, either. At the end of the day, people might care a lot more about what comes from the heart, rather than what comes from the mind.

I'm glad, though, to be writing this retrospective on the heels of When I Win, an assiduously structured work with a lot of deliberate thematic potency that managed to achieve similar levels of success as Fargo. For a long time Fargo was a millstone around my neck. What I once looked at as the start of my literary rise started to seem like its peak. This work that I, its author, so poorly understood, could not replicate even when I tried, and yet was by far my most popular story... It was a terrifying prospect for a long time. Though a lot of detail in this regard should probably be saved for if I write a Making Of post for Chicago in the future. (Side note: Despite the prominent role Cicero and the Chicagoans play in the final arc of Fargo, with their own unresolved theater of worldbuilding, I had no intention of writing a Fargo sequel until after the "commercial failure" of Modern Cannibals.)

Even at the depths of my self-esteem, though, I never resented Fargo or its success. It's a story I like. It's a story with a lot to like about it. And, even if I don't fully understand it, it's a story that has a lot of myself in it.

Thank you, everyone, for reading.

The concept art throughout this post was created by Phetaritette, from whom a fan once commissioned art of the main characters. At the end of the Making Of posts for Cleveland Quixotic and When I Win, I talked about where I got the names of the characters from, but other than the two Pokémon gym leader names and Henrik Ibsen reference I mentioned before, most of the names in this story were dredged from people I once knew. The only other exceptions are Erika's surname, which comes from Frank "Doc" DuFresne from Red vs. Blue; Bloomington's surname, which comes from rapper Dennis "Ghostface Killah" Coles (who would be the primary template for the rapper Malkwon in Modern Cannibals); and Hennepin's surname, which comes from League of Legends pro player Johnny "Altec" Ru.



Chapter 17: Misery (novel)

In fourth grade, this kid Zach would lug around a copy of Stephen King's It, all 1,000+ pages, to show to anyone he could. When he sat at his desk he would plop it down on the corner for all to see. He did book reports on it. On the playground he told us stories about the clown in the pipes and its deadlights. I remember, distinctly, one thing he said, with the utter confidence of a ten-year-old:

"In forty years they'll teach this book in school."

As a literary figure, King is a one-of-a-kind juggernaut with a staggering number of individual works embedded in the cultural lexicon. Compare to JK Rowling, who has sold more books by volume, whose most notable book is certainly more notable than any individual book of King's, and yet who has, really, only written one book (divided into seven parts). Nobody gives a shit about JK Rowling, Author. They care about Harry Potter, which she just so happened to write. She keeps writing other books post-Potter but nobody cares. Nobody reads them. I'm sure they're turning a tidy profit but The Casual Vacancy is a blank in the cultural eye. Meanwhile, King has It, Carrie, Cujo, The Stand, The Dark Tower, The Shining, Christine... the list goes on. Even fucking Needful Things got a Rick & Morty parody.

Part of this widespread reach might be how blessed King has been with adaptations. Kubrick, De Palma, Carpenter have all had their hand at King, and even random minor works like Stand By Me, The Green Mile, or The Shawshank Redemption were transformed into critically beloved classics. The film adaptation of Misery won an Oscar for Best Actress. How many Oscars have gone to horror movies? Not many.

But there's also something to King himself, as an author, that enables him to persist notably as Stephen King, Author, not simply a name attached to a work that exceeds him as an individual. Obviously he has an excellent knack for page-turners, but so does any author you can find in an airport store. The reason might be that, despite his mass market appeal, his stories are often deeply personal. It's not just his main characters being writers; when King suffered from drug addiction in the 80s, all his stories dealt with drug addiction, either literally or metaphorically (or both). When King got hit by a car and nearly died and spent a painful year rehabbing, every main character in every novel he wrote for the next decade got in some kind of horrible automobile accident and went through a similarly laborious recovery period. These classic King fixations are sometimes eyeroll-inducing in their ad nauseum application, but they are also a constant reminder of Stephen King, Author.

That might be why Misery is Stephen King's best novel. It's his most personal, the one that is most specifically about *him*. All of his protagonists are authors, but Misery is one of the few novels where the protagonist being an author is inextricably integral to the plot. It has, of course, the literal and metaphorical addiction theming of all of King's 80s output, but is also eerily prophetic 12 years in advance of King's Car Accident period (Misery came out in 1987; King was hit in 1999). Taken in isolation, the Addiction works chronicle slow descents into madness and inhumanity, while the Car Accident works are nearly opposite in trajectory: slow crawls out of the thin line between life and nonexistence. These ideas are unified in Misery, where Paul Sheldon's physical recovery after his car accident is tied to his mental dependency, first on codeine, and then on the page-turner book his psychotic captor has forced him to write. It's as though everything King has ever really wanted to *say* in his life, which he has intimated in bits and pieces in other works, finally comes together in one startling moment of unity.

(Perfect line from the Background section of Misery's Wikipedia page: "The novel's title refers to the eponymous heroine of Sheldon's book series, as well as King's state of mind during the writing of the novel.")

There are other, more technical reasons why Misery is his best, though. King is an author who never plans his stories ahead of time, and though this is undoubtedly the secret to his success at page-turners (even he wants to know what happens next), it has always caused his longer, more ambitious works to fizzle out in hasty anticlimax once he starts scraping 1,000 pages and realizes the chickens must come home to roost. His style of writing is much more appropriate for shorter works with more limited parameters, where he is less liable to go off the rails and is, from the very start, dealing with a binary set of outcomes. The Long Walk, a criminally underrated King work that I am surprised does not have a film adaptation, features a few kids walking down a road. Cujo, another King highlight, is almost exclusively about a mother and her child trapped in a car. Misery finetunes the basic scenario to its most minimalistic elements. There are two characters. The setting is a single room. The protagonist is incapable of walking. There is only one question, can only ever be one question: Will he live, or will he die? With these set-in-stone guardrails, King is free to employ his page-turner sensibilities to fullest possible effect and without fear of plunging off a cliff.

The limitations of Misery also play to another of King's technical strengths: His power as a psychological author. It's not something I see talked about often when discussing King, but a lot of his most common literary devices involve stream of consciousness, the way

(*intrusive*)

thoughts interject themselves in a parenthetical paragraph break, the way he'll drop long run-on sentences of mental screaming and scourging, the repetition of certain turns of phrase (*now we must rinse*) his characters latch onto and apply to new circumstances. Misery opens with a disorienting stream-of-consciousness passage depicting Paul Sheldon's emergence from a coma after his car accident, an opening far more akin to James Joyce than James Patterson. It's as though King has taken the aggressively anti-reader techniques of modernism and packaged them in a mass market box.

This, too, might explain why King endures as an author, because despite the array of excellent adaptations his works have received, some aspect of the psychology is lost in translation. Kubrick's Shining, for instance, was famously panned on release because it stripped out the psychological nuance of the novel in favor of the nuance of image and symbol. Kubrick was wise in his decision, because he was truly *adapting* the work to a visual medium, and so replaced psychological techniques that functioned exclusively in text with visual techniques fit for film. Though this is a testament to Kubrick's skill as a filmmaker, it's also a testament to King's as an author that Kubrick had to make such significant choices to begin with. Most conventional modern writing advice, even advice King himself gives in his memoir On Writing (which is perhaps the most-read "how to be a writer" guide ever), is about stripping down text to the basics of image, so that readers can parse and visualize information easily. This advice is, essentially, for writing books that can be conceptualized as film. As film has become the primary form of media in our culture, this type of advice reframes literature as subservient to film, rather than distinct from it. It is advice for creating stories that can be sold to Hollywood as screenplays.

For Misery's adaptation, director Rob Reiner wisely reframes the story to be similar to a minimalistic stage play (like, say, Waiting for Godot), with an emphasis on the acting performances above all else. It's this focus that earned Kathy Bates her Best Actress Oscar for Annie Wilkes. (James Caan as Paul Sheldon also does an excellent job.) And though this film adaptation is highly successful at *adapting* the source material, I watch it and still feel like it's missing a dimension with the excising of the psychological component from King's text, including the snippets of Misery's Return, the novel Sheldon is writing, which are a jarring break from the tone and style of the rest of the book in a way that emphasizes writing as an escape for Sheldon from his miserable circumstances.

I doubt they'll teach King in school, as Zach once proclaimed. There's a subplot in Misery where Sheldon seeks to be taken more seriously as an author, but in writing Misery's Return realizes -- triumphantly -- that he is, in fact, a pulp page-turning penner at heart. What King does show, however, is the uniqueness of literature as a medium even outside the vaunted strata of "classics", that even a pulp work can make use of its medium to accomplish something that could not be accomplished in adaptation. It's this lesson I would hope authors today keep in mind, no matter their goals in writing.

Chapter 18: Lucky☆Star (anime)

How does art age?

There's a joke in Lucky☆Star where the four main characters fill out a questionnaire that asks them what they want to be when they grow up. Konata, the otaku, puts down "Brigade Leader," which draws as punchline an eyeroll from her sarcastic friend, Kagami.

The core of this joke is that Konata has taken a serious question and answered it with a fictional "occupation" from an anime she likes -- specifically, The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya, which was monstrously popular at the time. Almost everyone watching Lucky☆Star in 2007, when it first aired, would understand this reference. That understanding would then foster a sense of kinship with the work, the feeling of "being seen," the long yearned-for ideal of niche nerd subcultures laughed at by society at large.

Despite its incredible influence on moe aesthetics and anime culture in 2006, Haruhi Suzumiya is virtually forgotten now, unwatched even by diehards and unrecommended by the old weebs who were around in its heyday. I've never seen it myself. It's my next watch, with another friend who is even more of an anime neophyte than I am; our third friend, who *did* watch it in 2006, refuses to rewatch with us. It's too cringe, she says. The suggestion I get is that, if we were to modernize the what-you-want-to-be-when-you-grow-up joke, Konata might instead put that she wants to become a Skibidi Toilet.

Haruhi Suzumiya haunts Lucky☆Star like a ghost. She is in almost every episode, as either a poster or figurine or manga cover or cosplay or karaoke rendition or even, once, a voiced commercial. She has more presence than most of the supporting cast, the majority of whom do not appear until the 14th episode (but who also haunt the show via their unexplained presence in the OP). Konata is voiced by the same actress who voiced Haruhi, a fact that launches an armada of arcane metafictional injokes, including a scene where Konata sees said voice actress in concert. The sheer magnitude of these references wash over the 2025 viewer. They are meaningless. Haruhi Suzumiya is dead and buried. She is seen more by the shadow she casts in this show than anywhere else.

The inscrutability of this massive swath of the show suggests that Lucky☆Star itself has not aged particularly well. Indeed, compared to its zenith in 2007, it's not faring much better than Haruhi today. The sole advantage Lucky☆Star has, in fact, might stem from the "Out Of Touch Thursday" meme, which keeps some small shard of it alive in the anime community's consciousness. Even if you take the time to research the references, needing to research them at all gives the ultimate impression is that Konata is no longer the trendy otaku she once was, but passe, lame, dated, cringe, Out Of Touch. It's only the thin line of competent verbal skills that keeps her from becoming her dark mirror, Tomoko Kuroki.

But Haruhi Suzumiya is by no means the only obscure reference the show flings out, and some of these references I can only imagine were unknown even to the teenage-skewing anglosphere anime culture of 2007. At one point, Konata makes a reference (Timotei, Timotei) to a Japanese commercial for a Finnish shampoo brand from the 1980s. Karaoke segments feature Japanese pop songs from the 70s (with Kagami sarcastically asking Konata "How old are you?" whenever she puts them on). The entire Lucky Channel bit that appears at the end of each episode is an extended reference to a Japanese-only radio show that ran concurrent to the original airing. Even within that context, the fact that Lucky Channel co-host Minoru Shiraishi is a real person playing himself (and the other co-host, Akira Kogami, is not) is lost on anyone without highly specialized knowledge. That the credits sequences of the show's second half feature the real Minoru Shiraishi in live action is equally easy to miss. The bleeding edge transience of the references culminates with the show recursively referring to its own fame. In one scene, Konata reads a fortune at a Kyoto temple that says "Konata is my wife"; this is a reference to real-life otaku going to a temple in Saitama, where Lucky☆Star is set, and leaving the same prayer.

The show requires footnotes. It had them, on the 2007 anime forums where the show accrued so much buzz, entire Bibles breaking down every reference; it truly wasn't understood even when it aired. It makes perfect sense why Lucky☆Star wouldn't age well.

Yet, watching the show for the first time in 2014, long after its cultural moment, and again in 2025, I have found it extraordinarily timeless. In fact, I liked it better in 2025 than 2014, despite an additional 11 years of watching anime that enabled me to understand exactly 0 things I didn't get the first time around. And there are a lot of things I didn't get. The references I detailed earlier are only the ones, in complete befuddlement, I bothered to look up; so many more continue to elude me.

In many ways, Lucky☆Star is aware of how inscrutable it is and compensates for itself. Wikipedia describes Konata as the "main character" of the show, and to the otaku audiences of 2007 she was the most relatable of the cast and by extension the most popular character by far (something outright stated in one of the Lucky Channel segments, which reveals the results of an actual character popularity poll), but in terms of screen time, she is not appreciably more present than either of the Hiiragi twins, Kagami and Tsukasa. It's not as though Lucky☆Star has anything resembling a plot, either, that would frame a particular character as the "protagonist"; at best the cast can be described as ensemble. This decentralization of perspective enables a wide variety of ways for the viewer to connect with the show. Konata's authentic (in 2007) otakuism made her the darling of that audience, but the show itself does not innately weigh her so highly. In fact, even when her references are inscrutable, it's the confused response of Tsukasa, or the sarcastic response of Kagami (who tends to call Konata the 2007 equivalent of "cringe"), that provide a contextual framework for what the joke is supposed to be. I don't need to know what the SOS Brigade is when Konata expresses her desire to grow up and become a Brigade Leader, because I can understand through Kagami's biting remark that it is some frivolous anime horseshit.

More importantly, the show's equivocation in terms of perspective makes it possible to empathize with Kagami's position over Konata's. The simplest comedy dynamic is the comedian/straight man, but the reliance of most narrative comedy on some form of social stakes -- either in the form of argument, humiliation, physical or psychological pain, or so on -- generally leads to empathy with one of the duo over the other. The straight man might be a put-upon everyman who is unfairly forced to deal with an obnoxious oaf, or a too-serious curmudgeon who is getting what they deserve from a guy who's just having a little fun. In the first case, the straight man is the point of audience empathy; in the second, the comedian is.

Konata and Kagami follow this comedy dynamic to a T, with Konata an aimless slacker and Kagami the uptight perfectionist. But in Lucky☆Star, divorced entirely from anything resembling a narrative -- episodic, situational, or otherwise -- there are zero social stakes to their conversations. Nobody ever "loses." Nobody is ever hurt. Nobody is wrong or right. Nothing happens at the expense of one character or another. As such, it is possible to watch the show and see the joke from the perspective of any given character at any time. If Konata says some arcane reference you don't get, Kagami's clapback becomes the joke. If Konata says something and you *do* understand it, the reference itself is the joke.

This comedic ambivalence is structurally remarkable (jokes typically have rigidly defined punchlines, moments you are "supposed" to laugh at), but comes with the price of the jokes not really being very funny. What it does do is create comprehensible and even "relatable" situations out of incomprehensible bits of referential information. Not understanding the reference is not an impediment to understanding Lucky☆Star. As such, Lucky☆Star functions as both a hyper-specific time capsule of 2007 anime subculture and a work that can be engaged with on its own terms even when completely divorced from that context.

The advent of the internet has led to an explosion in the spread of information and the ascendancy of the niche. It has also led to shorter shelf lives for information and an increased focus on the immediate. Memes burst into prominence, linger a month or two, vanish. Media is buzzed about in some section of society, is unknown everywhere else. A social media influencer has millions of followers and yet is a complete blank in the wider cultural eye. How can a work of art reflect this reality without rendering itself incomprehensible in a year, ten years, twenty? Is it possible to make timeless art in such a milieu, without stripping away as many signifiers of the world we live in to rely solely on "universal" and thus generic themes such as love, death, etc.?

I've seen many ways of attacking this problem. Infinite Jest's famous footnotes are one, as is the genre of "hysterical realism" itself, which attempts to create the suggestion of information density via massive novels with tons of characters spanning many countries and even time periods. Homestuck builds its own internal language of memes (I warned you about stairs bro!) that the reader will always understand no matter how many arcane applications those memes receive throughout the work. (Hence why an audience of teens in the 2010s were able to laugh uproariously at jokes about the 90s action flick Con Air that none of them had ever seen.) Multiverse movies, from Everything Everywhere All at Once to Into the Spider-Verse, depict the density of information horizontally rather than vertically, with unlimited variations on the same core theme. Even if you have never read whatever obscure comic run Noir Spider-Man comes from, you can understand him immediately based on his relationship to a sort of Platonic ideal of "Spider-Man".

These are all highly controlled forms of conveying the idea of "current day information density" without actually wallowing in actual current day information density. What's remarkable about Lucky☆Star is both that it actually does engage with the incredibly niche memes of its exact moment in time, but that it does so through the complete ceding of narrative control. Lucky☆Star functions because, not in spite of, the fact that it has no protagonist, no plot. It doesn't even have situations, like an episodic sitcom. It is not especially concerned with being funny, or dramatic, or heartwarming, or any particular emotion.

As a sort of thesis statement for the show, its first episode opens with a six-minute scene in which Konata, Tsukasa, and Miyuki discuss various ways of eating different types of food. There is no buildup, no joke, no emotional payoff, not even any of the references I've spent this entire essay talking about. There is no progression. The girls discuss how to eat one type of food, then move onto the next. In a way, this scene is a more aggressive challenge to the viewer than the niche references it employs later on. It is a complete surrender to banality.

Even within the context of the slice of life genre, which is full of comfy shows about Cute Girls Doing Cute Things, Lucky☆Star achieves phenomenal laxity. Other popular examples revolve around a specific theme that creates a sense of progression toward an ultimate goal; in K-On!, for instance, the girls are members of a band and work toward a successful performance, even if they spend a lot of their practices slacking off. Alternatively, without a clear theme, these shows might use surreal characters and situations to elevate the show above the mundane, such as in Azumanga

Daioh, where a main character is a 10-year-old genius in high school. Or, in the case of Clannad, there might be a romantic angle to the laid-back character interactions.

This is all gone in Lucky☆Star. It has been stripped down past the basics of storytelling, akin to an abstract work of art that is three colors on a canvas. (Or four, in this case.) In this context, even Konata's deep cut animanga references sink to the level of banality, their impenetrability both an abstract confusion and a level of verisimilitude that other works can usually only suggest or evoke when they attempt to grapple with the reality of subculture. (To this end, Lucky☆Star is massively advantaged by its adaptation, as studio Kyoto Animation also made Haruhi Suzumiya and was able to mine its cultural relevance without the usual fear of copyright reprisals, in a prognostication of Ready Player One/Space Jam 2-style pan-brand media crossovers.) Similar to the best abstract art, there is an odd, ungraspable power to the starkness of Lucky☆Star's composition; also similar, much of this power emerges out of the work's context. Not simply its hyper-specific 2007 cultural context, which I've already discussed, but also the way it contextualizes itself internally.

Because I lied when I said the first episode of Lucky☆Star opens with a scene of three girls talking about how they eat different types of food. I'm not even talking about the actual first scene, which is a 10-second quick gag where Konata tells Tsukasa she doesn't join a sports team because it would cut into her free time to watch anime. No, Lucky☆Star opens in episode 1 the same way it opens every episode, with this:

> The ambiguous 3 cm? Does that mean it's plushy? Wait!
> The wrapping is a uniform, argh, it's not an act, pooh
> Gotta do your best, gotta just do it
> That's time to catch n' release, eek
> Between sweat (whoop) sweat (whoop)
> Darlin', darlin' FREEZE!
> Kinda lethargic, something's kinda comin' out
> I love you... oh wait, one of those was different
> Worrywarts, high metal bars
> Tasty thoughts... and that's enough!
> The heated body of that flying you-know-who
> It's what you'd call a normal girlie
> Am I the only one surprised?
> Seconds on pork-bone broth ramen with wire-hard noodles
> Da da da da da!
> [Several seconds of indistinguishable chatter]
> Pom-poms cheer squad
> Let's get cherry pie [this line is in English]
> Happy fun welcoming party
> Look up! Sensation [also English]
> Yeah! Feeling of existence, dot dot small planet
> Collided and it melted away, in total awe
> Go all out to sing, shi-ranger!
> Take it away!
> I should be the one who'll be laughing in the end
> Because I have the sailor suit ← This is my conclusion
> It's only Monday!
> Already in a bad mood? What to do?
> I really prefer the summer outfits ← kya! Wah! Good! (cute!) <3

> Until we approach 3 pixels, no hesitations please ☆
> Do your best, be energetic
> My darlin' darlin' please!

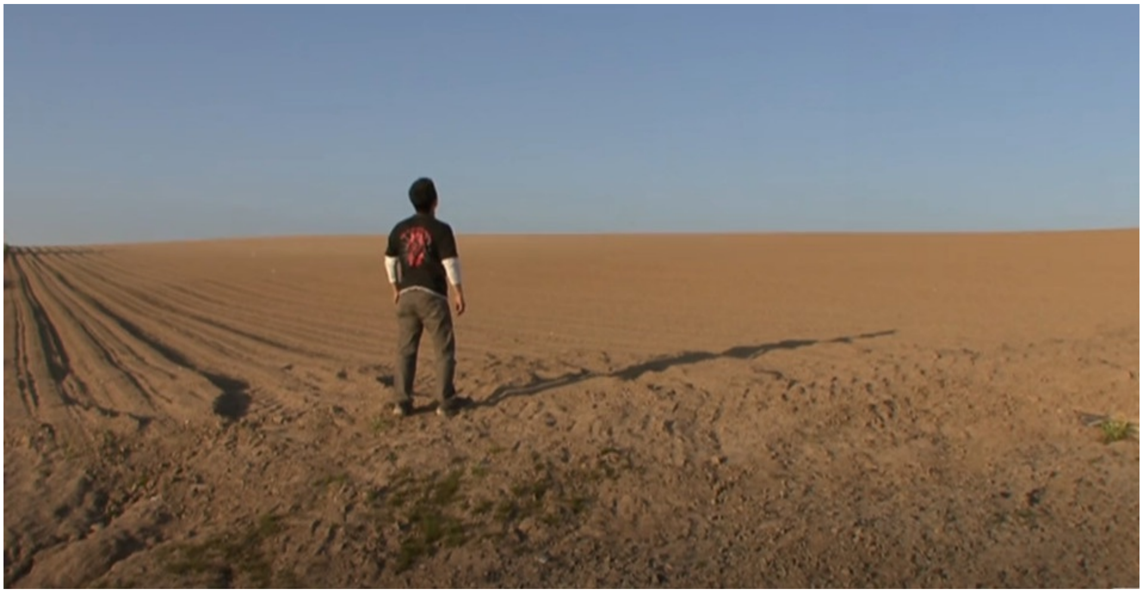
The lyrics of Lucky☆Star's OP are nonsense, both in translation and in the original Japanese (and if you don't believe that, the English line "Let's get cherry pie" should be evidence enough). At best, they are a mishmash of schoolgirl concepts and oblique anime references, which at the very least is an accurate reflection of the content of the show. But the presentation is frenetic, erratic, aggressively at odds with the show's lassitude, without any contextualizing remark from Kagami to make it make, even in the abstract, any sort of sense.

Likewise, on the opposite end of the show is its concluding bookend, the Lucky Channel segment. This segment also sharply juxtaposes the show's core content, first in tone -- being far more cynical and meanspirited -- but also in structure. Lucky Channel engages in the exact stakes-driven comedian/straight man dynamic that the show eschews. When the Lucky Channel co-hosts Akira Kogami and Minoru Shiraishi banter, the results are either Minoru's physical or emotional abuse at the hands of Akira, or Akira's humiliation as a failed but narcissistic idol constantly upstaged by the unassuming Minoru. Lucky Channel also has another concept anathema to Lucky☆Star: narrative progression. Minoru grows bolder as the episodes draw on, Akira more violent; in a late episode, a mental breakdown leads to the destruction of the set, which remains destroyed in the final few episodes as Minoru and Akira finally and without reconciliation descend into blistering hatred of one another. At the same time, these segments are the location of some of the show's most indecipherable and multilayered injokes, injokes almost defined by their transience as most stem from a real-life radio show lost to time if you weren't right there listening to them as they went live. This segment is probably the most consistently funny part of Lucky☆Star; that's not because its jokes make sense, but rather the blunt slapstick and Akira's dramatic shifts from ultra-cutesy child idol to chain-smoking world-weary industry cynic.

The effect of the OP and the Lucky Channel segment is to sandwich the sedate, relaxed, mundane central content of Lucky☆Star between chaos, nonsense, and irony. Thus, the inner show contextualizes itself as a retreat from the storm of information and self-reflexivity, despite the fact that it deals directly with these topics. The show's indolence renders them harmless, comprehensible, and nonthreatening. Lucky☆Star is a world where the unknown can be easily and pleasantly demystified; the show's fourth character, Miyuki -- sometimes nicknamed Miwiki -- is an encyclopedic fountain of knowledge whose primary role is to exhaustively explain oddities on the fringes of Japanese culture with a polite and friendly smile. Miyuki is clearly secondary to Konata and the Hiiragi twins in terms of screen time, which gives her the feel of a supporting character despite her main cast billing, with an emphasis on the word "supporting"; like a servant, the other three will, after a conversation among themselves, call her to define some term or idiom. (That this obliging sense of service comes from the richest and most aristocratic character of the cast is another matter.) In Lucky☆Star, information is not chaotic and confusing, the way it is at the show's fringes, or in the "real world", but something that stimulates curiosity and kinship. So many scenes begin with a character saying, "I wonder why...?" followed by speculation and finally an answer. In the absence of plot, progression, or even humor, it's this sense of curiosity that renders Lucky☆Star's mundane scenes compelling. And it is their tonal juxtaposition against chaos that renders them so comfortable, so soothing.

As the internet grows older and more central to everyone's lives, as the headlines everyone talked about last week are forgotten today, Lucky☆Star's expression of retreat and reorder will only continue to become more emotionally satisfying, even as its 2007 references become more dated.

What I find most potent in Lucky☆Star, though, is the steadily growing sense of wistfulness it fosters, not through any one scene or tone shift, but through a collection of tiny ones. New cast members are introduced in the second half, which dilutes the presence of the main characters and thins the tight-knit sense of friendship that unified the work. The characters increasingly ruminate on their futures (despite the lack of progression, time does pass linearly, and the show ends with the end of high school on the horizon), always suggesting a "real world" of adulthood lurking behind the corner. The show's artifice is explicitly exposed by the Lucky Channel segments, which metafictionally describe the show as "the show" and the characters as "actors." ("They must all hate each other once the camera stops rolling," Akira cynically suggests.) The ED of the show's first half features the four main girls in a karaoke bar; in the second half, though, this is replaced with live-action footage of the real-life actor Minoru Shiraishi from the Lucky Channel segments. Reality infringes on Lucky☆Star at its corners, slowly creeping inward. Its calm fantasy, a fantasy founded on verisimilitude rather than imagination, is gradually exposed as fake, a production. (Which it always was, no matter how real, how relatable it felt. For all the verisimilitude in its tone, these are characters who are more moe than moe, blobs of cuteness and distorted proportions beyond even the average CGDCT anime.) It ends, in the final episode, as the characters diegetically recreate the frenetic nonsense OP, with them all arrayed on a stage, the curtain rising to white light. And even more ominously, its final ED ends with Minoru Shiraishi intoning a few plaintive notes as he faces a lone and level plain.



This is Lucky☆Star's final shot. This what awaits outside of the show's dewy comfort. Bye-ni.

Chapter 19: Paranoia Agent (anime)

Unlike most works I review, where I often seek meaning "between the cracks," Paranoia Agent expects its viewer to interpret it beyond the surface level. The plot operates almost entirely via metaphor, eschewing conventional or even fantastical explanations for its core events. There is no dream machine, as in director Satoshi Kon's followup effort Paprika, that contextualizes the surreal occurrences with a sci-fi veneer. Nor are these occurrences depicted as psychological stand-ins, like in his earlier Perfect Blue, where a bouncing ghost idol chasing the heroine is revealed to actually be a mundane middle-aged woman huffing and puffing as she struggles to keep up.

Instead, Lil Slugger (AKA Shounen Bat or Bat Boy) literally exists in the world of Paranoia Agent, but the show is utterly disinterested in explaining how or why he exists; Tsukiko makes him up to get out of a jam, the media runs with her story, people gossip about it, and suddenly he is really there, actually attacking people. Approaching the narrative logically is a fool's errand, which makes Paranoia Agent difficult to engage with on a surface level. There is no surface level. You can understand Perfect Blue or Paprika in terms of plot synopsis without engaging with their themes, but Paranoia Agent makes no sense unless it is understood metaphorically.

Which begs the question: What is the metaphor at the heart of Paranoia Agent? What does Lil Slugger represent?

The common refrain throughout the show, whenever people explain how Lil Slugger operates as a serial assailant, is that he "shows up and attacks people who feel cornered." The people he attacks (whether they survive or die) seem to be "relieved" afterward, as if the attack has freed them from whatever responsibilities or obligations cornered them in the first place. Ultimately, Lil Slugger is revealed to have been invented by Tsukiko when, as a child, she let her dog get hit by a car; by claiming she was attacked by a kid with a baseball bat, she shifted blame for the incident away from herself. From these clues, the basic interpretation is that Lil Slugger represents victimization, particularly victimization that enables the supposed victim to avoid responsibility for their actions.

(By the way, I wonder why there's that big mushroom cloud in the OP? I wonder what that has to do with this?)

Paranoia Agent, via its semi-episodic structure, applies this metaphor of victimization to multiple strata of Japanese society, using it to interrogate Japan's cultural ideals, its preference for escapism in pop culture, and its high suicide rates. After a first episode that establishes the primary characters and core conceits of the show, episodes 2 through 4 take on a tone of social satire, dealing with a series of stereotypical exemplars of Japanese society (the popular honors student, the demure tradwife, the hardworking family man) who conceal darker, id-driven impulses (egomania, sexual rapacity, avaricious corruption). The reason these characters feel "cornered" is due to a need to maintain their outward-facing persona despite the growing demands of the id. Harumi, the woman with split personality in episode 3, embodies this strife explicitly as her dual personalities fight each other for control over the same body.

Notably, these characters all suffer nonlethal attacks from Lil Slugger. Though there is a vague suggestion that Lil Slugger "gains power" over the course of the story due to his memetic spread, which provides some justification for why these early victims survive while most later ones die, the nonlethality makes sense on a metaphorical level too. These characters are not attempting to escape reality but rather integrate themselves into it despite their hidden sins. Lil Slugger's attack is convenient for them, as the narrative of victimization he enables papers over the cracks that were starting to show in their masks. The honors student Yuichi, for instance, is seen by his peers as a bully -- they even believe he is Lil Slugger -- so becoming a victim of Lil Slugger eliminates this narrative, though he really is a bully.

A major shift in the metaphor of Lil Slugger happens in episodes 6 and 7. The victim in episode 6, Taeko, is unlike the earlier victims in that she is actually a victim and not someone who has brought her predicament upon herself via personal failings. She is "cornered" after discovering her father's incestuous lust for her, and Lil Slugger "helps" her not by giving her a way to conceal this fact from society, the way Yuichi and Harumi do, but to conceal it from herself -- he gives her amnesia, the first instance of permanent damage a victim receives.

From there, Paranoia Agent extends the metaphor naturally to suicide. The copycat assailant Kozuka is, in episode 7, the first victim Lil Slugger kills. Kozuka is a bizarre character not simply because he looks identical to Lil Slugger but also because of how differently he is depicted in his three major appearances. In episode 5, he is a self-proclaimed "holy warrior" and appears to be unable to tell video games from reality, but after Det. Ikari commits a little police brutality on him in episode 7 he changes entirely, admitting to fabricating most of his story. It's here, actually feeling the threat of police custody, he becomes "cornered" and is killed by Lil Slugger.

Meanwhile, episode 8 posthumously sheds more light on Kozuka, revealing him to be a frequent poster (alias "FOX") on a forum dedicated to suicide, with a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of suicide methods. This side of Kozuka is only hinted at once before, during his true confession, when he vaguely describes his motives for the copycat attacks: "So I thought, if... if I'm gonna do it anyway, then... before that..."

In Kozuka are unified the remaining two aspects of Japanese society Paranoia Agent explores via its central metaphor: escapism and suicide. Though it's ultimately unclear how much Kozuka actually believes his video game narrative and how much of it is him screwing with his police interrogators (he spends the entirety of episode 5 with a smug smile etched on his face), all versions of Kozuka are unified in their attempt to escape reality. In episode 5 this escape is via palliative fantasy media, in episode 7 this escape is from responsibility for his actions (most similar to the type of escape sought by the victims in the early episodes), and in episode 8 it's via suicide. He encapsulates all facets of Lil Slugger's complex metaphor in one character; it's no mistake that he is visually identical to Lil Slugger, a copycat or mirror, because he reveals everything that Lil Slugger represents in miniature. Kozuka's arc comprising the exact center of the show (in terms of episode count) also enables the show to pivot between these facets in a tonally succinct way. Well, almost. I actually attempted to watch Paranoia Agent once, many years before, and dropped it in frustration after episode 5, finding the ridiculous video-game-as-reality narrative too absurd even in the context of the caricatures of Japanese society that came before. Paranoia Agent's struggles with tone are the main reason why I rate it less highly than Perfect Blue or Paprika.

Nonetheless, after Kozuka's death the show segues into another stretch of episodic narratives, these dealing increasingly with suicide and escapism. It's here that the show expands on its other significant metaphorical character, the Sanrio-esque mascot Maromi, "The Healer Dog," who at first seems to act counter to Lil Slugger, but who is ultimately revealed to be "the same as him." This is literal in the sense that Tsukiko invented both Maromi and Lil Slugger, and both are inextricably tied to the same incident in her past, but it holds true metaphorically: if Lil Slugger is the victimizer who gives you an excuse to escape reality, Maromi is the inner voice calmly urging you to do so. "Stop thinking," Maromi tells Tsukiko. "It's not your fault, it's that Lil Slugger." The Good Cop to Lil Slugger's Bad Cop, not unlike Det. Maniwa and Det. Ikari in their interrogation of

Kozuka -- Maniwa indulging Kozuka's video game narrative, Ikari breaking it with violence only to allow Kozuka to succumb to metaphorical suicide.

Maniwa and Ikari are their own metaphorical opposites, first explored through the comparison of Maniwa's youth versus Ikari's age (youth and age is another recurring theme in Paranoia Agent, though not one I'll talk about here), but later through their divergent attempts to fight Lil Slugger. Maniwa becomes a representation of fantasy. He fights Lil Slugger in a way that takes him literally, not metaphorically, donning a superhero persona ("Radar Man") and swinging a sword around. Hearing the cryptic line from Det. Ikari's wife that "Maromi and Lil Slugger are the same," he attempts to explain this literally, uncovering from Tsukiko's father how she invented the Lil Slugger story after she allowed her dog Maromi to die. Maniwa confronts Lil Slugger with this literal truth as though it is a coup de grace, but of course Maniwa has made the same mistake Paranoia Agent the show doesn't want its viewer to make; he has not engaged with Lil Slugger as a metaphor, and Lil Slugger defeats him instantly.

Ikari, meanwhile, becomes a representation of reality (along with his wife). He is defined in the back half of the show by the toiling, menial jobs he runs between to make ends meet. His wife is dying of disease. She fends off Lil Slugger not by fighting him literally, but by exposing the core of his metaphor; it is her line that he and Maromi are the same that ultimately causes him to retreat from her, after she has painstakingly explained as explicitly as Paranoia Agent gets that Lil Slugger represents escapism and avoidance of responsibility. Ikari briefly succumbs to fantasy (a fantasy rooted not in entertainment but in nostalgia, giving it a more "real" veneer), but ultimately destroys his fantasy world with a similar speech that makes explicit the underlying metaphor of the show.

After all, that's what metaphor is, right? It's representing one idea with another. Using fantasy as a metaphor moors it to reality and prevents the escapist impulse fantasy otherwise engenders. Maniwa only empowers Lil Slugger when he takes reality and breaks it apart into a fantastical narrative, because Lil Slugger is a being of fantasy; Lil Slugger is similarly empowered by the gossip of the masses, whose wholly fictional inventions (that he smiles before he strikes, and later that he is a massive hulking man with a freakish face) he absorbs into himself. Hence why Lil Slugger exists without any kind of literal explanation for how Tsukiko rendered him corporeal; there can't be a literal explanation, because to have one would make him no longer a living metaphor.

At the same time, Lil Slugger (and Maromi) are metaphors for something else, something far more tangible and real. This metaphor is never explicated by the show, but contained within a few key visual details.

Lil Slugger has a radiation symbol on his hat. His golden baseball bat combines the long tubular design of Little Boy atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima and the bright yellow color of the Fat Man bomb dropped on Nagasaki.

Meanwhile, Maromi's design, with the long body and fat bulbous head, evokes a mushroom. Given the mushroom cloud is shown at the beginning of every episode, the significance of this design choice isn't difficult to grasp. Lil Slugger and Maromi, who are the same, metaphorically represent the atomic bombing of Japan.

When combined with the rest of the Lil Slugger/Maromi metaphor, the suggestion is that the atomic bombing has created a widespread cultural trauma that has generated an impulse toward escapist fantasy, suicide, and avoidance of responsibility -- perhaps even the responsibility that led to Japan being bombed in the first place. Ikari espouses a nostalgic yearning for "the good old days" of

Japan in the past (with a particular fondness for a brand of matches called "Rising Sun"). The nostalgic fantasy world Ikari falls into seems idyllic but has distinctively fascist touches; when he destroys Maniwa's broadcast urging him to bring Tsukiko back to reality, the townsfolk praise him: "Look, the officer stopped the poisonous broadcast!" (It's reminiscent of Ikari's police brutality against Kozuka, too.) Similar to the stereotypical exemplars of Japanese society from the early episodes, this nostalgic vision of Japan is a mask for a fascist underbelly, and the intercession of Lil Slugger/the bomb gave Japan an external victimizer that enabled the country as a whole to continue hiding its crimes from itself. Even today, Japan struggles with admitting to many of its heinous actions in World War II.

(I would also love to posit, though I have only circumstantial scraps of evidence, that the emphasis of Paranoia Agent's epilogue on the cycle starting anew, with the old man being replaced by Maniwa and the victimization of Lil Slugger being replaced by the victimization of the big flowing blob monster that swept through Tokyo's underground subways, is a metaphorical representation of Japan's next biggest societal trauma, the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo terrorist attacks, out of which -- via Evangelion -- otaku culture and escapist fantasy media exploded in popularity.)

This significantly darker undercurrent to the Lil Slugger metaphor manifests one other way in the show, one that's easy to miss given how the show takes great pains to conceal it. For a long time I had difficulty understanding the purpose of Lil Slugger's first victim, the sleazy reporter Kawazu.

Superficially, Kawazu makes sense as a victim. He is in debt after hitting an old man with his car, and desperate to score big on Tsukiko's sham story about Lil Slugger. Metaphorically, though, he's a major outlier. Unlike the dissemblers who comprise Lil Slugger's next few victims, he is openly, outwardly sleazy, with no attempts to conceal this nature. Similarly, though he is pressured by his debts, he is calm and collected immediately prior to his attack as he casually strolls after Tsukiko upon flushing her from her apartment. He smilingly describes Tsukiko to the man demanding payment from him as "a big job." Everyone else, immediately prior to being attacked, is in the midst of a mental breakdown; but Kawazu is bending down to pick up Tsukiko's dropped handkerchief, smiling calmly to himself as he does it.

Despite not fitting with the rest of the victims, Kawazu receives especial emphasis at the end of the story; he's the only character other than Tsukiko and the two detectives to appear in its epilogue, sharing a meaningful glance with Tsukiko as he passes her on the street. I couldn't understand why. What does Kawazu represent here?

Before writing this essay, I made a list of every Lil Slugger victim (cutting out the fake victims, like Tsukiko and the people Kozuka attacks) in sequence to try and detect any patterns. It was only when I wrote down the final victim of Lil Slugger that I saw the connection.

The last victim of Lil Slugger shown in Paranoia Agent is Hatomura, Tsukiko's boss, who is attacked fatally in episode 12. On his own, Hatomura is an archetypal example of a Lil Slugger victim, not even worth talking about. Pressured by deadlines that Tsukiko keeps missing, he threatens her in his car, before realizing what he has done and manically begging for forgiveness. He even states "I'm up to my ears in it too." His desperation is clear, he's having a breakdown, he wants to escape, and Lil Slugger does what he always does.

But I rewatched Hatomura's attack, and something happens right before it that happens only one other time -- right before Kawazu's attack. Tsukiko's Maromi doll flicks its eyes toward him.

Though Kawazu and Hatomura might be "cornered" in their own regard, Tsukiko is also cornered in both of their attacks. In fact, she is significantly more cornered than Kawazu is; she's running, desperately, on crutches, as he pursues her. The one quick shot of the Maromi doll shifting its eyes before the attack suggests that these attacks are done on Tsukiko's behalf, to protect her. And since Kawazu is Lil Slugger's first victim, the one that makes Lil Slugger real, the metaphor becomes complicated; is Lil Slugger a tool for self-victimization, or a weapon of victimization that can be wielded at others?

Maybe, then, that look Tsukiko and Kawazu share at the end of the show is one of forgiveness? Acceptance? Tsukiko's office lady outfit suggests she has "grown up," after all. Kawazu's smirk is the same one he gives when he picks up the Maromi handkerchief right before he is attacked. Is it that he knows the truth? Give the complexity (and vagueness) of Paranoia Agent, it might not be possible to discern an answer with confidence. Or perhaps I'm still missing something integral, still not seeing a side of the metaphor.

Chapter 20: Umamusume: Pretty Derby - Beginning of a New Era (film)

Film as a medium is notable for its combination of audiovisual storytelling, but also for its temporal limitations: almost all feature films range between 90 and 180 minutes, or what is expected to be viewed in a single sitting. This limitation has had a unique impact on the sports narrative in film. A single game in most popular team sports will last 3 hours or more, so sports films have become masters of shorthand, commonly expressed through montage; even a climactic game will depict only a few pivotal moments, with the rest of the game implied by transitional shots of the scoreboard.

While this reliance on shorthand renders possible the compression of a season- or tournament-spanning narrative in a single film, it comes with a sense of detachment from the film's ostensible subject, the sport. With a few exceptions, such as the obscure 1999 Kevin Costner film For Love of the Game (which has a bottle episode-like focus on a single perfect game), a sports film is more about what happens off the field than on: teamwork-building, practice, behind-the-scenes drama, adversity overcome. The actual sport is depicted as a series of benchmarks for progress (the team is bad; the team is heating up; the team is winning the championship), not as a complex combination of strategy and physical performance with its own innate, rules-based drama. For example, the most popular sports film of the past two decades is probably Moneyball, a film that as part of its core premise focuses more on the team manager than any on-field player.

This limitation of the sports film became clear to me when someone got me to watch 100+ episodes of Haikyu!!, an anime about a high school volleyball team. Unfettered by the temporal constraints of film, Haikyu!! delves much more deeply into the particulars of its sport of choice, dedicating as much as an entire season of TV to a single match. There is minimal shorthand, so while Haikyu!! does not eschew training, improvement, and off-the-court drama, it is deemphasized relative to the sport; often, the longform format enables the show to depict these things during matches themselves, as there is enough time for characters to struggle, learn, develop, and overcome *on* the court. As someone who enjoys sports -- even as someone who does not enjoy the time it takes to watch a 100+ episode show -- I vastly preferred this approach, which centers the story around *volleyball* ("Volleyball" is, in fact, what the title translates to) far more than what you'd typically see in a sports film.

With this context, the fact that the horsegirl gacha game movie is the best sports film I've ever seen is likely significantly a byproduct of the specific sport the film is about. Horse racing isn't a team sport and an individual race does not take more than a few minutes. Because of this, Beginning of a New Era is able to depict races in full, and depict them often, frequently with minimal narrative tissue in between. The characters themselves are often narratively backgrounded; there are only six characters total with any role at all, and only four with a significant role. Even these four are relatively anonymized within the narrative. The protagonist, Jungle Pocket, is startlingly single-dimensional, devoid of backstory or character traits beyond her all-consuming drive to win. Her rival, Agnes Tachyon, while more superficially eccentric, likewise has no past. Neither interact with anyone who isn't either a fellow racer or a coach; their lives revolve entirely around racing, yet there are no stakes to their races other than their desire to win. They don't need money, or status, or anything else, and the only adversity they face -- besides losing -- is the omnipresent threat of injury, which is devastating because it prevents them from racing. (Three of the five characters who race have their careers curtailed by injury at some point or another.)

What matters, then, is the sport. The sport of horse racing, specifically, a sport relatively low on strategy or complexity, so that there is little opportunity for even the in-depth detail that makes Haikyu!! so compelling. Of course, if there were complexity, it couldn't be appropriately handled given the temporal limitations of the medium. This film introduces two different color commenters across its runtime, who combine for a single one-sentence remark explaining the sport's strategy. By far the more memorable line from the commenter booth comes from the play-by-play commenter, screaming at the end of a match:

> AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!AGNES!(Jungle Pocket groans "Tachyonnn")AGNES!AGNES!

The trick Beginning of a New Era pulls is to blast everything, from plot to character to complexity, down to absolutely nothing. In this nothingness, it is able to convey a stark emotional intensity so powerful it compensates for everything willingly discarded and then some. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film's music, which it rarely uses, often willing to let entire minutes-long races play out with the only audio being the pounding of hooves(?) and the layered panting of every racer, before subtly transitioning into an understated electronic beat. It is strikingly minimalistic, much like all the traditional narrative aspects of the film. It emphasizes the physicality of the sport over the emotions of the competitors. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film's one training montage, which is not actually a montage because it lacks any music at all.

Montages are ubiquitous in sports media as they depict improvement rapidly, bridging the narrative gap between failure and success. But in this film, the training montage appears near the end, after Jungle Pocket has already won the championship handily (thanks to Agnes Tachyon's injury-related retirement). Without music, the montage makes no emotional statement, but its tranquility (set mostly on an idyllic beach) contrasts the next race, where rain hammers down and Jungle Pocket loses to a field of nobodies due to a mental, rather than physical, block. Retrospectively, the montage suggests a misalignment in Jungle Pocket's priorities, an inability to deal with the true limiting factors holding her back, but the neutrality of the montage itself leaves its position and purpose ambiguous until viewed within the film's greater context. Jungle Pocket is a brutish character, incapable of expressing herself beyond her repeated desire to "be the strongest," and the minimalistic intensity of the storytelling supports her point of view, until she runs up against the wall of her perceived inadequacy compared to the retired (and thus unbeatable) Agnes Tachyon.

Nowhere is this conflict between the physical and the mental more clear than in the film's visual decisions, which range from smear frames devoted to a purely physical depiction of speed and emotion to surreal, psychological imagery.

It is this psychological imagery that provides the complexity to a narrative otherwise devoid of it, accomplishing through evocation and suggestion what the script, characters, and sport itself lacks. It culminates in Jungle Pocket literally crushing her mental landscape to bits with her hand, releasing herself from the psychological to participate in a final race that is almost exclusively physical in its presentation. And, of course, this dichotomy of presentation feeds back into the core conflict between Jungle Pocket (physical, brute) and Agnes Tachyon (mental, scientist).

It is also, perhaps, the exact perfect mode of presentation for this utterly bizarre franchise, which has as a conceit (horses are replaced by human girls who are superhumanly strong) something that seems to invite further explanation, worldbuilding, a depiction of a totally reoriented society, but is perfectly content to instead show only horse racing. I watched this film with four other people and they could not stop asking "I wonder if horse girls fought in historic wars" or "Are there horse girls who don't race?", questions the film refuses to even gesture toward answering. This may be a battle of body and mind, but in the end, body triumphs. Well, maybe not. The movie ends, in an utterly surreal curveball, with the characters performing a concert. This concert finale is a violent intrusion of the franchise's gacha roots onto a film that is otherwise virulently opposed to idol aesthetic (or gacha-ism; the limited cast means there are barely any characters being promoted), on one hand reasserting normalcy for the property and on the other hand emphasizing via juxtaposition the emotional intensity of what came before. It's also, perhaps, the perfect conclusion to a work that is so keen on balancing the real and surreal, the minimalist and maximalist, the physical and mental.

Chapter 21: Yosuga no Sora (anime)

Traumatized Kozue

When I first watched the anime adaptation of Higurashi When They Cry in 2007, my assumption -- knowing nothing about its source material beyond it being a visual novel -- was that the show's unusual structure, with 4-episode mini-arcs invariably ending in the death of the entire cast before the next arc resets from an earlier point, was intended to adapt the branching routes that characterize many VNs.

This assumption was wrong, but by design. Higurashi the visual novel is itself linear, and the anime adapts its linearity (mostly) faithfully. However, the resetting arcs *are* meant in the original to evoke the typical structure of a visual novel; the VN is playing with its expected format, which is basically a prerequisite for being a visual novel anyone still talks about today.

What fascinates me is how the anime adaptation, by complete accident, or rather by the simple fact of *being an adaptation*, promotes the misunderstanding I made. In the VN, it will be clear to the player that the story is intended to be linear, that there are no actual routes based on decisions you make. Its structure creates an illusion, one that is effective in its own right, but also innately obvious as an illusion by virtue of the reality of the gameplay. It is only in the uncertainty of adaptation that there becomes a possibility the original story has some sort of decision tree that simply cannot be done in the medium of film (excepting, of course, the Final Destination 3 DVD bonus feature that allows the viewer to press a button on their remote to choose what characters do to avoid death). The illusion is able to persist far longer than it can in the VN because it is unclear whether the story's linearity is present in the original or an adaptational decision.

I make this preamble because Yosuga no Sora is living the life Higurashi only pretends. It is the anime adaptation of a route-based VN that presents each route one after the other, "resetting" every few episodes to an earlier point to show a different route that could not possibly exist within the same timeline as the last. Wikipedia outlines the structure with a handy chart:

Wikipedia Chart

Despite how uncommon this adaptational decision is, it is actually quite similar to how a player will typically experience a route-based VN. You play one route to completion, then go back (either to a save point or, as Muv Luv helpfully includes as a feature, by pressing a button to skip to the next decision branch) and play the next.

This is, of course, a fundamentally bizarre way to experience a story, one that really only works in a video game, where the concept of resetting or starting over is ingrained in the medium. Most stories, regardless of medium, only ever present a singular series of events, even when those events are presented out-of-order via flashbacks or flashforwards. If one event in the story isn't continuous with the rest of the story, it's usually an error. The recent popularity of multiverse stories has led to an increased depiction of branching paths and concurrent versions of storylines, but these are always framed as such explicitly within the context of the story.

Yosuga no Sora, the anime, does not explain itself. It is unclear, within the diegetic world of the show, what its branching paths are meant to represent. In many ways it relies on the audience's innate understanding of the medium it is adapting to make sense of it, even more than Higurashi. In a video game, the player must actively choose to reset the game, reach a branch point, and pick a different option. The participation of the viewer informs the meaning of the branching narrative, and in many ways "excuses" breaking the fundamental narrative rule of continuity. After all, nobody, upon rewinding a VHS to watch a movie a second time, would think that the story is actually four hours long instead of two, with the second half depicting the exact same events incomprehensibly occurring again via the philosophical concept of eternal return. The viewer/player exists outside the thing they are viewing, so their intervention in rewinding it frames anything that happens post-rewind in a metatextual way.

As an anime, though, Yosuga no Sora is consumed passively, with no action on the part of the viewer. Because of this, the experience of seeing each route sequentially is far different. There is always a moment of disorientation as each new route begins by showing a scene that appeared several episodes ago, given now there is no context of resetting the game to make its meaning immediately clear. And even if it quickly becomes apparent what has happened, the linearity of the viewing experience enforces more importance on later routes over earlier ones. In a game, a "true" route might be established by length (longer being more important), by explicit fiat either in-game or outside it, or by how "good" the ending is (in terms of positive outcomes for the characters, not quality), but it is not established by the act of resetting itself. Getting the "true" route first and resetting it to get a side route doesn't nullify the primacy of the "true" route in the viewer's mind, despite the side route literally overwriting the "true" route in terms of the order the viewer experienced them. As with rewinding to watch a movie again, this is because "resetting" is an action taken by the viewer, and is innately viewed metatextually.

But in Yosuga no Sora, where resetting is done by the text itself, earlier routes do seem to be inherently overwritten by later ones. Kazuha, the romantic focus of the first route, is relegated to a barely-seen side character by the final episode. Conversely, the Monika-esque class rep Kozue, who doesn't even have her own route, is easy to forget exists before she suddenly plays a pivotal role at the final route's conclusion. Nao's route gets overwritten explicitly by Sora's; in the final episode, protagonist Haruka admits that he was forcing himself to fall in love with Nao to avoid admitting his actual feelings were for Sora. This confession recontextualizes the entire show up to this point, all of the girls Haruka hooks up with and then metafictionally forgets before finally (sorry for burying the lede on this one) rawdogging his twin sister. Were all of those relationships fake? Flings Haruka pushed himself into to get away from his sister, who is frequently presented as a succubus-like she-demon who crawls out from under Haruka's desk in daydreams to either devour him or suck his dick?

Sora Eat

Haruka's behavior throughout each route supports this conclusion. With Kazuha and Akira, Haruka is an extremely active participant. He essentially butts into their personal business and offers to expend all of his energy to resolve their issues, far beyond what either of them seem to expect or want from him. Since these are the first two routes, this extreme willingness to help seems to be Haruka's character, the kind of protagonistic altruism that is common in a self-insert visual novel where all of the drama needs to come from the side of the romantic partners, not the player. But later, when Haruka -- in an attempt to stop thinking about his sister -- drags Nao to a love hotel and, despite her protests to stop, shoves her on the bed and starts to forcibly undress her, his earlier pushiness no longer appears to be fully altruistic in nature.

Not to mention, of course, how Haruka is not at all the active force driving his relationship with his sister.

The show's structure, giving primacy to the final arc (Sora's), also helps contextualize Sora herself. After all, if the previous arcs are being overwritten, they must be being overwritten by something. Sora spends most of the show seething in the background, sulking at home in her gossamer white dresses as a fan blows on her, giving her a decidedly ghostly appearance while Haruka is out having adventures anywhere, with anyone, else. Her default expression is glowering. She seems to like nobody and nothing except her brother. She cannot cook, cannot clean, rarely goes to school, gets sick or fakes getting sick. She will play mean games to get what she wants, like at the end of the Nao arc where she runs away from home to try and break up Haruka and Nao. The ultimate supremacy of her arc is her meanest game yet, a metafictional gambit that erases even the possibility of any other outcome from existence. The thing about Sora's arc is that, despite it being the main arc, despite it being the arc that defines the entire show (this is an *incest* anime!), it is also the arc where Haruka is easily the most miserable. Each of the preceding arcs, despite whatever effort Haruka had to force upon himself, end unquestionably happy, with a functional, acceptable, and healthy romantic relationship between Haruka and each girl. With Sora, by contrast, he becomes semi-catatonic, staring into space, gripping his head, pushing Sora off him, telling her they should stop, telling her they should live separately, hitting her when she flippantly alludes to getting an abortion if she needs to. I mentioned earlier that the "good" route in a VN is often defined both by being the "true" arc and by having the best outcome for the characters; in Yosuga no Sora, the true arc is unquestionably the worst outcome for everyone involved except Sora herself. (Then again, it *is* her name in the title.)

Well. Maybe it doesn't end so well for her either. Yosuga no Sora breaks a viewer's typical belief in narrative continuity via its presentation of visual novel routes, but it is continuity that it ultimately relies upon to frame its ambiguous ending. Do the twins drown in the lake, each pulling the other down in their futile attempts to save themselves? Or did they miraculously escape and move to Finland together? Both interpretations rely on the audience's particular understanding of narrative continuity. The ED shows, in a metaphorical form, Nao saving the twins from drowning in the lake; though this isn't shown in the show itself, it's certainly rendered possible by the fact that Nao was last seen in the area searching for Sora, and that Akira seems to have seen Haruka running toward the lake. But to accept this explanation, the viewer is required to treat the ED (which is actually the second ED, in a very "second breakfast" kind of way) as part of the show's continuity. Even after accepting the Nao solution, though, the Finland ending has an issue with continuity: Sora destroys her toy rabbit before going into the lake, yet she has the rabbit perfectly intact on the (suspiciously empty) Finnish train as it passes from a brick-walled tunnel into a (suspiciously empty, only sky) landscape.

The Afterlife?

(Notably, the tunnel-to-sky landscape the twins pass is identical to the one they pass when they enter town at the beginning of the story -- despite them supposedly leaving town -- while the train is very clearly not the same train.)

Coupled with how, when he and Sora were sinking to the bottom of the lake, Haruka thought to himself "Maybe this is a good thing, now we can go to a far away world," the breaks in continuity suggest that the twins did in fact drown in the lake, that their "sudden leaving" is explained by their bodies never being discovered, and the strange train scene depicting a passage to the afterlife (the "far away world"). But this explanation also has an error in continuity: Who sent Kazuha the text saying they were leaving?

These errors point to both interpretations of the ending being "wrong." Of course, in a normal narrative, one where continuity matters, that would be true; or, at least, the audience would need to accept one continuity error (the toy rabbit or the text message) as intentional, and one as a mistake. But Yosuga no Sora is a work that has already disregarded continuity in the way it adapts simultaneous routes. Both interpretations of the ending are "wrong" in a traditional sense, while both are "right" in a narrative that has discarded continuity altogether.

Or does one ending, like Sora's route, implicitly overwrite the other?

Well, there is another ending. An ending to the only story that has progressed continuously over all 12 episodes of the show, that has developed in an exactly linear fashion without interference from any other arc.

That's right: the maid arc.

What the maid doin?

At the end of every episode, after the ED (the first ED, not the second ED, which comes afterward), there is a short comedic segment showcasing the antics of the maid Motoka. The offset nature of these segments, divided from the main story by the ED (literally the "ending"), as well as their cartoony chibi style and outrageous, surreal gags (Akira has activated Big Heads Mode in Goldeneye 64), immediately establishes them as noncanon, nonreal, a joke only, not to be taken seriously.

Yet in Yosuga no Sora, the last arc erases the arcs that came before it. Sora's arc consumes those of the other girls. Motoka's arc is the last arc standing, its conclusion coming even after the conclusion of Sora's arc; and, surprisingly enough, its ending is the "good" one, the one with the happiest outcome for all characters, which it emphasizes by showing an all-character group shot as Motoka and Haruka are married:

True Ending

If this is the last shot of the show, who's to say it's not the "true" ending? And, ultimately, the only way to save Haruka from being pulled down into the depths of the lake by his sister?

Chapter 22: Serious Weakness (novel)

In the world of Serious Weakness, everyone must piss. It is an immutable constant, one that defines the narrative at almost all points and certainly all of its most crucial ones. The pissing starts early, in the first chapter even, as Trianon excuses himself from an uncomfortable conversation-slash-tennis match to use the restroom. Upon returning, and finding the conversation still uncomfortable, he inexplicably excuses himself to use the restroom again. This action precipitates the next chapter, titled Double Fault, a title that refers most obviously to the violence Insul inflicts via tennis racket, but also seemingly to this act of double bathroom-excusing, especially given one such excusing is literally a tennis fault:

> He picks the ball up and swings, missing his own serve. His arm feels sluggish. "I have to go to the…I'll be right back."

Given this context, the second chapter's title suggests that the real reason Insul attacks and abducts Trianon is as a penalty for the "double fault" of pissing twice (or rather pissing once and pretending to piss twice). This is technically true in the sense that the second bathroom trip leads Trianon to discover the corpse Insul has murdered, which then forces Insul's hand. But Serious Weakness is, more than anything else, a romance, and rather than relying on the rote logic of criminals and their attempts to evade the justice system (which often, as Insul implausibly escapes capture for his ridiculous murders, is completely disregarded) it is far more concerned with the emotional logic that dictates the relationship between its two leads. When Trianon returns to Insul, babbling about a corpse, Insul picks apart the meaning of the "double fault" of twice-bathrooming, as though from it he has gained psychological insight into his next victim:

> Insul leans back, racket resting on his shoulder like he's posing for a magazine cover. "You don't like talking about the bathroom." "What?" "You were vague the first time. When you were actually going to the bathroom. But the second time, you said the bathroom, specifically. People are specific when they're making an excuse."

Pissing is thus an expression of weakness. It is the piss in the water that activates Insul's shark sense. Post-abduction, Trianon exhibits a lack of control over his ability to piss similar to his lack of control over his facial muscles due to myasthenia gravis (the "Serious Weakness" of the title). He will piss himself in fear when Insul threatens to decapitate him with a car window; he will piss the bed when sleeping with Insul; and twice he will have trouble pissing until Insul holds his penis and whispers scary words into his ear.

I dated a fujoshi for seven years, so I'm not blind to the fetishistic nature of all this pissing. Serious Weakness does kidnapping far more in the mold of Killing Stalking than Misery, which is often to the work's detriment during its attempts to position Insul as a legitimate threat to Trianon; Insul will always pull back before going too far, before mutilating Trianon too thoroughly, and the X-shaped scar Insul cuts onto Trianon's chest, which Trianon laments at length, is small potatoes compared to Annie Wilkes chopping off Paul Sheldon's foot with an axe and his thumb with an electric knife. (And then giving Paul a birthday cake with the severed thumb as one of the candles.) Serious Weakness delights in its edginess, expressed most obviously via its Columbine-inspired school shooter Insul, but the comparison to Misery does it few favors in this regard. When Serious Weakness ends with one final piss scene, in which Trianon—no longer piss-weak but now triumphantly wielding his piss as a weapon—pisses on "a bookshelf of New York Times bestsellers and classics of traditional publishing, along with gems and highlights of various small presses arranged by subject matter, safe and captured flirtations with dark and dreadful things," it reads as a statement on Serious Weakness' place in a darker, more dangerous subculture, an indication that it is the truly transgressive art that the mainstream can only gesture toward. Yet New York Times bestseller Misery, written by the juggernaut of pop lit Stephen King, and adapted into an Oscar-winning film by recently-murdered director Rob Reiner (known also for When Harry Met Sally and The Bucket List), pretty much exceeds it in brutality and violence, undermining the sentiment.

I'm being unfair. King nowadays seems to come from a different era, and those that have replaced him (such as JK Rowling, who stole his best-selling-author-of-all-time title) tend more toward the saccharine and child-friendly in a media landscape that, if not wholly forsaking violence, does at least seem to have become increasingly allergic to sex. If there is somewhere Serious Weakness exceeds Misery in raw exploitative transgression, it's sex; the novel hinges on a long and explicit anal rape scene that happens shortly after a long and explicit pissing scene.

In its obsession with school shooters, however, Serious Weakness seems to be aware of the childish impotence of its antisocial violence. Serious Weakness' view of a school shooter is rooted in stereotypes about Columbine while (perhaps intentionally) ignoring the 25 years of mass shootings that followed, which have increasingly abandoned the very 90s misfits-versus-preps mindset commonly ascribed to Harris and Klebold in favor of political derangement and outright mental illness. Insul is described, tragically, as a school shooter who had the misfortune to survive and grow up:

> You were meant to be a school shooter, the most disposable organism, bursting as you rose from your depth, horrifying the people who discovered your gore washed up on the surface. But your friend swallowed your sin and you survived, somehow.

As a cultural artifact, Columbine is itself the school shooter who had the misfortune to grow up, an indelible mark on the collective consciousness increasingly at odds with the reality of mass violence today. In its lack of ideological mooring to right-wing conspiracy or Islamic jihadism it possesses a twisted sort of purity, an expression of violence for its own sake rather than one subservient to a specific political viewpoint, or to a brain tumor or schizophrenia. It is a vague, unfocused raging against society itself, specifically the society of the schoolhouse. It is innocently antisocial, as opposed to the socially antisocial realm of radicalized politics. And yet—and this is what has made Columbine so popular in certain fujoshi circles—it is not *fully* antisocial, as Columbine was committed by two friends, two people together against the world (in their view, as they mowed down random students for no real reason).

Serious Weakness exhibits this same vague, apolitical, undirected anger toward society. Its world is rotten to the core, not due to some specific enemy but as part of a widespread and all-encompassing corruption. Its precariousness is exemplified by the onslaught of natural disasters that batter it. In one chapter, an earthquake strikes at the same time the historic cyclical ARkStorm befalls California; these two calamities cannot possibly be connected, are not even connected to climate change. There is no identifiable cause for them, nothing that can be fought against or reformed. Everything is simply falling apart, apocalyptically, and the only response to this violence is to commit violence back.

Same goes for the people. Outside of the protagonists Trianon and Insul (two against the world), almost all other characters are—at least in the first half of the story—invariably depicted as vain, superficial, stupid, talentless, cruel, and without any interiority or complexity. Reading it I am reminded of the works of JD Salinger, whose protagonists similarly view everyone outside themselves (and their one designated special someone, usually a family member) as "phony." It's the same sociopathy that guided the Columbine shooters ("It's gonna be like fucking Doom," they said, likening the people they planned to kill to NPCs), the sense that only you are real. And if only you're real, then any attempt by society to change you must necessarily be a violent act worthy of retribution, no?

This is the ethos that consumes Serious Weakness, at least for its first half. As the story goes on, the viewpoint complicates, is increasingly challenged. Even in its early chapters, there are hints of self-awareness. Insul explains that he is incapable of both dreaming and visualizing images in his head, suggesting that he, in fact, lacks interiority himself (and indicating his self-described "retardation" or arrested development, his perpetual high school mentality). And Trianon, the perpetual victim, first of society and then of Insul, is comedically pathetic, a stark contrast to Misery's resourceful Paul Sheldon, whining and pissing himself and incapable of mustering a token attempt to escape his captivity even as more and more opportunities present themselves. The prose of the first half of the story emphasizes the pair's fundamental lack of difference to the superficial world around them, using a brisk creative writing workshop style that anchors simple, clear, unshowy sentences with brief flourishes of sensory imagery. It is a style of stimulus and response, observing without insight the surrounding world and only rising above disinterest when pain, hunger, or thirst necessitate it. Despite the violent subject matter, it's a prose style that could be read in any of the bestsellers Trianon eventually pisses on at the story's close. An example, picked mostly at random:

> Trianon takes inventory of the yard. There's a gate on the far wall. Looks like a simple bolt latch. But his legs are heavy and tingling and he's not sure if he can trust them twice. He has the memory of trying to run with legs like that through the park as a teen, desperate to keep up with the others. Those early tests to see if he fit into some configuration of "hot" or "cool". His legs sank to the grass, dead weight, jeans stained dark green at the knees.

The prose makes a marked shift in style around the story's midpoint, during the party scene that ends with Trianon's rape. Events are increasingly punctuated by longer, more digressive passages in stream of consciousness style, with more artistic vibrancy, both in terms of imagery and wordplay. The construction verges, sometimes literally, into verse rather than the dry staccato simplicity of before:

> Have to stop him. No matter what. But you haven't hurt anyone yet. Not directly. Defend your honor, find out what happened at the zoo, but can you survive becoming a complicated story? You're not that kind of person, except part of you is now, and your organs are in rebellion. That would be your sanguine liver, your galling bladder, torrents of red and yellow like the toilet after he spit blood in your piss, the humors of infancy and adolescence drowning your adult spleen and your safe, phlegmatic brain. But this bathroom isn't a heroic landscape, it’s a glorified hole for shitting and pissing, and you're the hole and you're taking his shit.

(Note the recurrence of the piss motif.)

This burgeoning interiority, at least on Trianon's part, develops into him making his first serious effort to escape Insul's control. As the so-called "Storm of the Century" descends on California, washing away the Central Valley and much of the rest of the landscape, and the protagonists flee toward an abandoned cabin under increasingly unsafe driving conditions, Oenone pulls the car onto the side of the road and states, "I'm guessing everyone needs to piss as bad as I do." They do, of course (this is Serious Weakness after all), and Trianon uses the piss break diversion not—as in the opening chapter—as an excuse to hide from discomfort, but to engineer a nearly successful attempt to kill Insul by running him over.

So what causes this change? What transforms Trianon from a passive and barely thinking byproduct of society to someone both more expressive and with more agency?

It's possible that it's the romance with Insul, which begins in earnest in the wake of their misadventure at the museum, when Trianon learns more about Insul's school shooter past (a scene presented as a perspectival shift, breaking Trianon out of his depthless insularity via the narrative form). In the X mark Insul carves on Trianon's chest there is a frequent refrain that Insul has "modified" Trianon, altered him in some way. This X, likened to the X-ing out Insul does when he vandalizes art, is an act of nullification that erases the feebly constructed societal image of Trianon. One of Insul's first lines, justifying his art vandalism, echoes Fight Club: "People want to destroy something beautiful."

I felt like destroying something beautiful.

The destruction of conventional art—the destruction of Trianon—is tied to that same 1999 vaguely antisocial rage against society embodied by Columbine. Trianon's arc from a feeble misfit poorly imitating society's image of him to a somewhat triumphant pisser-on-the-mainstream mirrors the arc of Serious Weakness itself, reduced via violence and sex to a transgressive, fetishistic genre work that then builds itself to a more complex artistic statement framed as a challenge to established taste rather than something squirreled furtively into its own hole.

Well, sort of. Serious Weakness does piss on the mainstream, but it also leaves questions unresolved as to the tenability of its characters' ability to persist beyond the ending of the novel. The final situation, though presented with a macabre positivity and reconciliatory anal sex scene (in contrast to the anal rape of earlier), leaves Insul a wanted murderer, Trianon an accomplice in his crimes, and Oenone a chained slave in Trianon's bedroom. Their living situation can only exist due to the charity of the wealthy, nonjudgmental, vaguely Christ-like Clayton, who is ominously absent in the final chapter:

> "Clayton said he'd be here." "Maybe he got tuberculosis." Insul looks at him, then laughs. "Yeah. He got tuberculosis." "He got tuberculosis…" "Shit's fucked."

In a story with very few meaningful (or even named) side characters, Clayton stands out. Alongside the much more prominent Oenone, he challenges the notion of the outside world as vain, insipid, lacking internality, and cruel. But while Oenone is bulldozed by the perspective of the two leads, diminished into a pawn in their games under the not-unfounded but ultimately flimsy justification that she is herself manipulative and controlling like Insul, Clayton exhibits an unchallenged if distant power over everyone by the end of the story. It's his (anime decaled) car that he graciously loans them to drive to their cabin outside the reaches of society; it's his boat-driven relief trips that feed them.

Oenone is, for all her societally-appropriate presentation, a weakling like Trianon and Insul, a puppet of society, a cog in the art restoration business looking to climb upward. But Clayton, as the son of the new museum curator, is synonymous with the power structure itself. Oenone can be enslaved, the NYT bestsellers can be pissed on, but Trianon and Insul's rage against society can exist only at that society's tacit approval and permission. And that renders it impotent, ultimately, a childish raging, a Columbine that only kills other kids, rather than anyone actually relevant to the way things are. (Even striking Clayton would ultimately mean nothing. He's just the son of the real owner.) Insul and Trianon are an aesthetic curiosity, anime decals. And if Clayton disappears, as he does at the end of the story, what happens to them? How do they eat? They don't. Their tacitly approved existence is revoked. The end.

That's the fate of transgressive art in modern neoliberal society, where freedom of speech is supposedly guaranteed. It exists, for all its blistering hatred of its society, at that society's leisure. It can live in its own cabin in the wilderness, where society doesn't have to care about it, but that's it. And if society ever decides to revoke its permission, it starves.

Ultimately, then, Serious Weakness exposes its own impotence as a transgressive upheaval of the artistic mainstream. What else are Insul and Trianon at the end of the story than the very "safe and captured flirtations with dark and dreadful things" they piss on? Trianon is, after all, likened to a dog at the end, not only by Insul's suggestion that people will think it was a dog that pissed on their books, but by the fantastical and inspired Bullet Wife chapter, set in a Borgesian Backrooms world of an endless school with a school shooter-stratified society, where Trianon literally becomes a dog boy with a tail and everything. He's leashed. He's kept. He's even domesticated, if not housebroken.

But while winking at its ultimate failure as a transgressive artistic project, Serious Weakness does not linger on it, instead ending on a note of triumph for its main characters. Insul and Trianon, forgetting the chained-up Oenone, have a final scene of almost cloyingly sweet consensual sex; Insul has been healed, his violent impulses sublimated into romantic ones, Trianon replacing Blake who instilled in Insul blind rage by forcing him to kill (what else?) a dog. (Insul now fucks the dog instead of killing it.) Trianon has transformed from a bland and unobservant semi-NPC to a deeper thinker, a more introspective understander of himself. If they have not changed society, they have changed themselves, and in that there is at least a victory. Hence the piss. Piss might be an expression of weakness or an ultimately limp act of vandalism, but it's also something else: a system by which waste is filtered and expelled from the body. Throughout the story, the chemical nature of everything Insul and Trianon consume is perpetually emphasized: energy drinks full of artificial compounds, crappy hot dogs and pizzas, pepper spray, drugs. This is the dross of society it forces down your throat, the crap with which it pollutes you. By pissing, you expel those accumulating chemicals and preservatives. It may be a transgressive fetish, but it's also something everyone must do, and perhaps that is why Clayton and society allow it to exist. Serious Weakness may not upheave society, but it is akin to the act of pissing: disgusting, but an essential process of self-purification.

Chapter 23: The Making Of: 1 Over X

I. Final Summer

It was the final summer after I graduated high school. My group of friends and I were at one of our houses, playing video games. There were about ten of us. These are not their real names.

This group had been friends since elementary school, except for me, because I went to a different one. It was a group of nerds. Some were academic achievers, some cinephiles, some tabletop enthusiasts. Some of us were going to Stanford, some community college. One, Dan, wasn't going anywhere.

I had a complicated history with Dan. Unlike the others, I knew him in elementary school; he attended mine for third grade before transferring out. During that singular year, he was my nightmare. I was a weird child. Basically nobody liked me, even the kids I hung out with, even their parents. (Especially their parents, in some cases.) But most of the kids I hung out with were straight-A students with parental expectations, so their abuse lacked real cruelty. Dan, not a straight-A student, was different. He was savage. This was a long time ago, so I don't remember exactly what he did to me in third grade, but I do remember wishing he would die.

When he transferred out it was my salvation, and I returned to a more typical level of social ostracization for the rest of elementary school. When I went to junior high, Dan and I were in the same school again, but by then he had his own group of friends and was content to ignore me.

My whole problem was that I liked to make myself impossible to ignore. I was not quiet or introverted. I was not someone who vanished into a corner. I was loud and obnoxious and incapable of taking a hint. I liked to follow people around, even if they didn't like me. I wasn't aware they didn't like me. I thought I was part of their group. I ignored their abuse for weeks, months, even years. Then, at some point, something would break, I would get fed up and realize I was despised, go hang out with a new group, and the cycle would repeat.

Junior high was bigger than elementary school, with a lot of new people who didn't know me and thus didn't hate me yet, so it was the perfect time to find a new group. In PE I talked to this guy

Nate, who seemed chill enough, so one day at lunch I sat down uninvited at Nate's group's table. This group happened to be the one Dan was in.

That first day, they all ignored me. They didn't acknowledge my presence at all, even Nate and Dan. I was just there. This was a great improvement for me, so I kept coming back.

Eventually, of course, they had to acknowledge me. And, acknowledging me, they didn't like me. Particularly Dan. I tried to ingratiate myself, in my typical wrongheaded fashion. In computer class, where I gained access to the school's yearbook photos, I photoshopped Dan's head to a picture of his pet Chihuahua, put the chimera in outer space, and gave the picture the Word Art caption SUPERDOGGY. The computer class teacher, looking over my shoulder, said, "Are you sure your friend will like this?" I said, blithely, "Oh of course. We're cool like that."

Dan was not cool like that. When I printed out the picture and showed him at lunch, he attacked me with a pencil. Physically overpowering me, he jabbed the pencil into my back as though it were a gun, forced me into the computer lab, and made me delete the file. This heralded a period of physical abuse where he would chase me around school. I was a fast runner, so this often felt like fun parkour to me, jumping up and down flights of stairs. Once, after we went to a friend's house and I beat Dan at Smash Bros. (and gloated prodigiously about it), he waited until we left to go home to jump me and try to throw me into the canal. I managed to squirm out of his grasp and run away.

Eventually, as the years went on, things changed. Rather than becoming more aggressive, Dan mellowed out. The group went from hating me to accepting my presence. Dan and I found mutual interests. We would spend hours discussing what would happen to our group in the event of a zombie outbreak, or if we all got put on an island and were forced to kill each other. He told me about weird webcomics, like Dr. McNinja and Thinkin' Lincoln. We made a shitty Halo 3 machinima. He took me to his house and let me play this new game, Persona 4, and I saw the secret twist villain (who I didn't know was the villain) and said "That guy's the killer I bet," which made him mad but in a fun way, not a way that led to him hitting me.

We had, in fact, become cool like that.

Then, about two weeks before we graduated high school, he stopped showing up to school. He didn't show up to graduation. He was never a good student, so we figured he just stopped caring, the way seniors stop caring during their last semester. None of us were worried. He still showed up when we got together to play video games at someone's house. He was there that day, during the final summer, with the other nine of us. He was quiet. He was very quiet.

Near the end of the day, he said he wanted to tell us something, something serious. He had us all go outside, into the yard. We sat in a circle. He explained, solemnly, that his dad kicked him out of the house.

None of us knew his dad, with whom he lived alone. We never went to Dan's house, not as a group. Only, sometimes, would he allow one of us to go there with him, and only right after school, while his dad was still at work. He didn't like to talk about his dad. Once, while we were playing Persona 4, Dan pointed to a painting of a mist-shrouded landscape above the TV and said his dad smuggled it out of North Korea. That was all I knew. Whenever his dad showed up, a silent and stern figure in the hallway, Dan quickly said it was time to leave.

The inciting incident, Dan told us, was that he failed a driving test, which meant he wouldn't be able to get a job. So his dad kicked him out. Didn't even let him take any of his things, including his clothes.

This was a dramatic revelation for a group of suburban kids insulated from any true drama. I didn't know what to say. Out of the aggregate, though, a consensus emerged: Dan would obviously be allowed to stay at our houses until he figured something out. Also, we would break into his house and steal his stuff for him.

We loaded up into a pair of cars and drove to his house, which was on the corner of a major road. His dad was at work. One of us stood outside as lookout while Dan led the rest to the backyard, climbed in through an open window, and unlocked the back door. Equipped with trash bags we collected his clothes, video games, worldly possessions. In broad daylight, we walked out the front door and loaded all his stuff into the trunk.

I was terrified. I was certain the police were going to get us. For weeks afterward I was certain they would.

Possibly because I was terrified, I volunteered to let Dan stay at my house first, even though my house was small and he'd have to sleep on the floor. He spent the next few days there. He was very quiet, very withdrawn, which made sense, given what happened. He told me he was talking to his mother and older sister, who lived a few hours away, to figure something out. The next day I took him to see Toy Story 3, and afterward we stood in the parking lot around my car for an hour, saying nothing.

Another day, he wanted to see his friend from the Korean school he went to on weekends, a guy named Ken. I hadn't met Ken. None of us had. Dan had mentioned him a few times, always in conjunction with Korean school. I said sure, I'd drop him off. He told me not to take him to Ken's house, but to leave him at the middle school we used to go to. I did, and he spent all day away, and at night I picked him up from the school, still without seeing Ken.

After about a week, and apparently no answer from Dan's mother or sister, another member of the group let Dan stay at his place. So I dropped Dan off there with all his stuff.

For the rest of the summer, Dan bounced from house to house. Eventually, a member of the group named Ron suggested Dan stay in a house that had belonged to his grandmother before she recently died. His family was holding onto the place to sell it, but in the meantime it wasn't being used. So Dan moved in.

This was when he started sending us messages.

He saw a dead bee, he said, on the sidewalk. He touched it with his finger and it revived, flying away. There was a helicopter hovering outside his window at night, shining a light on him. Ron's grandmother wasn't really dead. She set up cameras throughout her house, recording everything he did.

We didn't know what to make of it. Dan always told a lot of jokes, invented stories like the elaborate zombie or battle royale scenarios. I started to get nervous that something was going to happen, something bad, but I didn't know what.

One day we were all at someone's house, playing video games. Ron had picked up Dan and brought him along, though Dan spent the day in another room, apparently on his laptop, refusing to talk to anyone. At the end of the day, Dan came out of the room.

"I'm going to kill myself."

This caused a stir even more dramatic than when he told us he'd been kicked out. Everyone once again loaded up into their cars and drove to Dan's temporary house, where we would be on suicide watch. All knives, razors, and drain cleaners were rounded up and hidden. The whole group would be there all night for him, making sure nothing happened.

Dan immediately went to his room and fell asleep. Everyone else stayed up, playing the newly-released StarCraft II or the less newly-released Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge on their laptops. With Dan asleep, though, I decided the all-nighter wasn't exactly necessary, and went home to sleep.

This turned out to be a good decision, because when my cell phone woke me at 6 AM the next day, I was informed by my friends that they all stayed up the entire night, they were all dead tired, and they needed someone to come watch Dan while they got some sleep. I showed up to the house, where to keep themselves awake they blasted meme videos at full volume (MENERGY!!!). As they shuffled out the door and into their cars one after another, they told me, "Don't let him look under the sink. That's where the knives are."

Dan woke up.

THE WORLD
ARCTIC OCEAN
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
NORTH PACIFIC OCEAN
SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
INDIAN OCEAN
SOUTHERN OCEAN
RUSSIA
CANADA
NORTH AMERICA
UNITED STATES
SOUTH AMERICA
BRAZIL
EUROPE
ASIA
CHINA
AFRICA
AUSTRALIA
INDONESIA
INDIA
GREENLAND
JAPAN
NEW ZEALAND

It was only me and him, in the dead grandmother house. The house was nearly barren. It had a bed in the bedroom, and a small television with a couch in the living room, and in the hall hung—instead of family photographs, or paintings, or an encouraging motto—a giant Rand McNally map of the world, the kind you would find in a classroom, with tiny pictures of every national flag along the bottom. The map wasn't even framed, its corners curled.

In the garage, pinned next to the door, were tiny photographs of topless women on motorcycles. And there were cameras in the walls watching our every move.

"So," I asked Dan, "what do you want to do?"

He said absolutely nothing.

We sat on the couch by the TV, staring forward. Watching the hallway with its giant map that led deeper into the house, where the door to the bedroom hung open in muted sunlight. A fear was building inside me, staring down the hallway, the strange and surreal fear that something awful, the not-dead grandmother maybe, was in that room, that if I got up and walked toward it she would emerge reaching for me, but only once it was too late to turn back.

"I'm the new Jesus Christ," Dan said. "You're all my apostles."

I turned on the TV and we watched an all-day marathon of American Ninja Warrior. We watched for hours, and hours, and hours, and hours.

At some point, the day had to end. Ron returned late in the afternoon with his parents. They let me go, and I went. I never saw Dan again.

The rest I heard secondhand. Ron's parents decided to finally confront Dan's father. At which point they learned that Dan's father had not, in fact, kicked him out of the house, that he had no idea where Dan had gone, that he knew absolutely nothing. Dan had not been talking to his mother or sister, either. His friend from Korean School, Ken, was actually his drug dealer. And when Dan was sent to the hospital, he was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

That was the end of the final summer. I went to college in a different city, and drifted away from that group, the way you do when you leave high school. Dan, apparently in an asylum of some kind (though I don't think they call them asylums anymore), still sent messages, messages about how he distrusted the pills they were giving him, about how he was being spied on, about how everyone was out to get him. Sometimes the messages were threatening. *I'll pay you back for everything you've done to me...* The same anxiety I felt that summer would flare up again, I'd imagine him tracking me down at my college and killing me. But gradually the messages slowed, then stopped altogether. Dan started taking his pills. He left the asylum.

The last I heard, he'd joined the army.

II. Modern Cannibals

I didn't know it at the time, but 2017 was the start of a lot of bad things I would inflict upon myself over the next few years. All of those things had the same root cause: Modern Cannibals.

Specifically, the fact that nobody read Modern Cannibals.

Fargo, a story I didn't plan, a story I just sort of sat down and wrote, was an unexpected success. Not only were its numbers unfathomable compared to everything I'd previously written, but the feedback was uniformly positive, often glowingly so. Many comments described it as the best fan fiction ever written, a story that changed the commenter's life. My confidence as a writer soared. All I could think was, *If they liked Fargo, wait until they see what I do when I actually try*.

I had been working on Modern Cannibals since 2012. For 5 years, I constantly iterated on the story and characters and constantly rewrote the first few chapters. Before Fargo I'd written a draft of Modern Cannibals 60,000 words long, which I scrapped entirely, thinking I could do it better. What I wrote in 2017, I knew was better. It was brilliant, I believed. And because I believed it was brilliant, I was certain it would be a success that blew Fargo out of the water. It's impossible for me to overstate my expectations. I believed, with full sincerity, that Modern Cannibals would not only be a massive hit on the internet, but would break out of the internet. The traditional publishing sphere would be forced to take notice; I foresaw articles in respected publications asking, "Who is Bavitz?" I unironically expected Modern Cannibals to win the Pulitzer Prize.

My thinking probably seems delusional. I had excess faith not just in myself but also in the vaunted Homestuck fandom, which I thought would be an excellent springboard to wider success. (After all, look at Toby Fox and Tamsyn Muir.) Sure, by 2017 Homestuck was a bit past its expiration date, but in 2015—when I started Fargo—Madoka Magica had been, too. Meanwhile, this was the

HOMESTUCK fandom we were talking about, nigh legendary for its size and rabidity. If Modern Cannibals was a little avant garde, so what? Homestuck was too, a fact its fans were proud of.

My excitement was uncontainable. As I started posting Modern Cannibals, barely a month after I finished writing it, I felt compelled to start my next story. It is the most compelled I have ever felt to write.

The story was called Useless. It was about Miranda Vanadzorian, a college student who lost her arm and both eyes in an accident. The conceit was simple; Miranda is being stalked by a serial killer, who targets anyone who gets close to her, maliciously isolating her. I got the idea in 2015, the same time I got the ideas for Fargo and Cockatiel x Chameleon, a period of intense personal misery and copious amounts of anime. (For more on this period, read The Making Of: Fargo.) While Fargo was inspired by Madoka Magica, Useless came from a much trashier origin: Mirai Nikki.

It was the trashiness itself that inspired me. My history with horror began, like most children of my cohort, with that dolled-up creature feature, Jurassic Park. During my teen years, my love of the genre developed thanks to SciFi Channel original movies, 80s slashers, and the grotesque torture porn popular at the time. To me, horror needed to be trashy. That was the point, that was what made it work as horror instead of simple tragedy. There had to be something revolting, something that churned your stomach, something that made you not want to watch, something that felt dirty and dingy and rotted. Though not a horror story itself, Mirai Nikki has the tone of one, mixing over-the-top violence with transgressive sexuality. Sexuality works a lot better with horror than you'd think, and it's because of that transgressive aspect, the sense that you're watching something you shouldn't be. It puts you on edge, makes you uncomfortable, but also fascinated, drawn to watch more. That contradictory feeling of "I can't look" and "I have to see what happens next"—that's horror.

Unfortunately, Useless was doomed by the ticking time bomb that was the inevitable non-response to Modern Cannibals. When it became increasingly clear that no, I would not be winning the Pulitzer, no, this wouldn't be a bigger hit than Fargo, and in fact no, it would not even muster a fraction of Fargo's interest, the confidence high that propelled me through the past year finally ended. My ego was mortified. Useless, at 10,000 words, could no longer be sustained by my sense that anything I wrote was automatic gold. I scrapped it entirely.

No, as I stared at the ruins of Modern Cannibals and its pathetic less-than-one-review-per-chapter on fanfiction.net, I had no choice but to interrogate my entire artistic project. I asked myself the question that would come to dominate my creative vision for the next seven years, the question that would be the true originator of Chicago, Cleveland Quixotic, When I Win the World Ends, and even—though it may seem ridiculous now, given the final product—1 Over X. That question was:

III. How Do I Recreate Fargo?

Fargo was successful. Modern Cannibals was not. This despite my belief that Modern Cannibals was the better work. Necessarily, this must mean a work's quality was not the sole determiner of its success. This conclusion alone was earth-shaking; though I knew there was plenty of mainstream dreck, I earnestly assumed cream would float to the top. Modern Cannibals forced me to reckon with the fact this was not true.

(The alternative would be to say Modern Cannibals was *bad*. I refused that even more. When faced with the question of whether the world was wrong or I was wrong, I knew the answer.)

Okay. So what made Fargo succeed and Modern Cannibals fail?

The first attempt at answering that question—which I would attempt again and again over the years, getting it wrong each time—led to two conclusions. The first was obvious: Genre. Fargo is an (urban) fantasy story, with an emphasis on action and adventure. It slots neatly into a genre popular enough to have its own shelf at the bookstore. Modern Cannibals is more uncategorizable.

My second conclusion was more esoteric, rooted in what I personally felt was the biggest difference between Fargo and Modern Cannibals. I assiduously planned, drafted, and redrafted Modern Cannibals over a period of years. Fargo, on the other hand, popped into my head one day and I banged it out with almost no forethought or revision. While I previously considered this difference to the advantage of Modern Cannibals, its failure made me reconsider. Maybe there was something electric about how organically Fargo arose, a spontaneous sense of discovery that came as a natural byproduct of me, the author, discovering the plot and characters at the same time I wrote them. Perhaps that electricity transferred to the readers, drew them into the work the way Modern Cannibals' designed precision did not.

Perfect! The solution was simple, then. To recreate Fargo, I'd write another urban fantasy story—a dark one, spruced by a horror twinge, exactly like Fargo and its wraiths—with minimal preplanning, allowing myself to organically develop the plot and characters.

So what would my new urban fantasy serial be?

IV. 1 Over X, Drafts 1 and 2 (2017)

rock and roll
CATS
screaming rock and roll
rock and roll

1 Over X began life in 2017 as an urban fantasy story.

It's remarkable how, despite its original conception being radically different from what it ultimately became, so many of its core elements appear intact in the initial draft. The main character was Enid Lim, a serious girl obsessed with class ranks, logical in tone. I wanted her to be the exact opposite of Z. Coulter from Modern Cannibals, whose manic voice possibly made the prose difficult to parse. While the name Z. evoked zaniness and abnormality, Enid Lim's name was intended to be generic, old-fashioned, the name of a bore. Enid is a classic grandmother name (and the ninth largest city in Oklahoma), while Lim sounds like Limp or Lame. I invented the name on the spur of the moment, because this story was supposed to be electric.

Enid Lim attended All Saints Academy, a private school in Newport, Rhode Island. The school's name popped into my head immediately (All Saints is the second largest city in Antigua and Barbuda) as a riff on Heavenly Host Elementary, the school in Corpse Party, a horror anime I'd seen recently. I chose Rhode Island as the setting because New England is the traditional horror capital of American fiction, and Maine and Massachusetts had already been done. Choosing Newport, meanwhile, had nothing to do with The Breakers, which at the time I did not know existed; I wanted the story to be set on the actual island of Rhode Island—called Aquidneck, not Rhode—because I had an idea of the island eventually being magically sequestered Umineko-style, preventing escape.

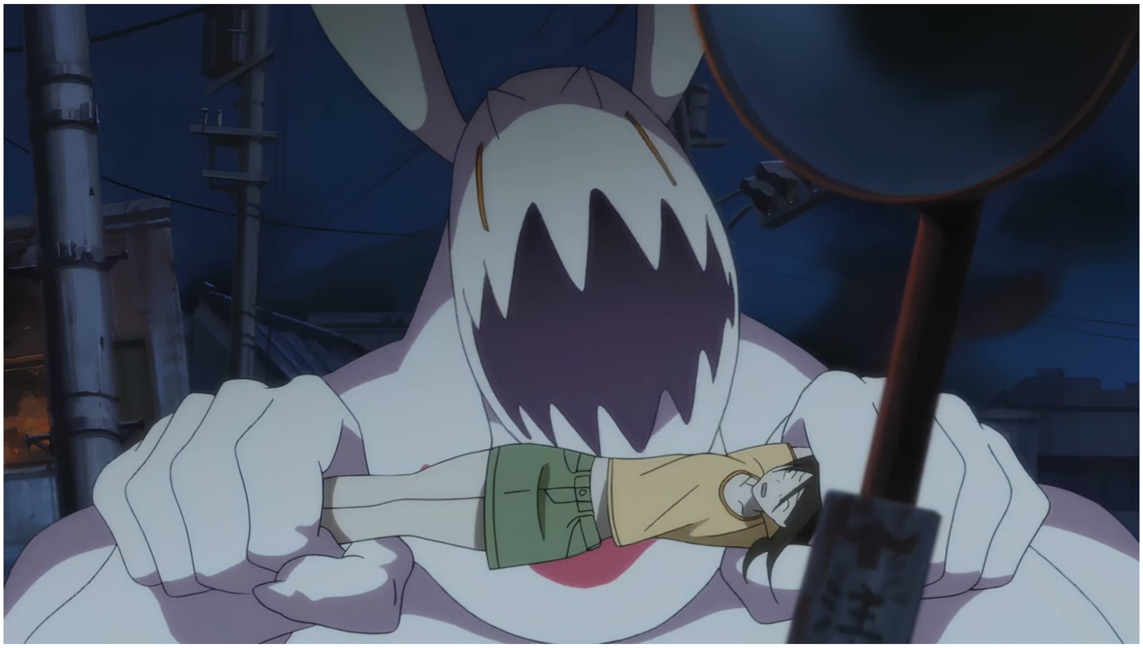
Even some of the supporting cast appeared in the original draft—at least in name. Among Lim's classmates there was a Cherry Corbett, a Weaver, and a "Wintermint." Their personalities were different: Corbett was Class Rank 1 with an airy, detached demeanor, while Wintermint—still Lim's academic rival—was more socially aware and less affected. They still enacted the calculus test score comparison scene, though not as a riff on American Psycho. It was just the sort of thing I used to do in high school too. (I was also obsessed with class ranks.)

Most notably, the draft had the title I would keep throughout the story's long development: 1 Over X. Though its meaning was much different back then.

Despite these similarities, the story was otherwise much different. It begins with Lim waking up in the dorm room of a mysterious new transfer student, Shinozaki, unsure how she got there. Shinozaki (named after the ghost in Corpse Party) claims Lim fainted; Lim is suspicious, but lacks proof to the contrary. Lim returns home (All Saints Academy is a boarding *and day* school) and gets berated by her Tiger Parent single mother, who has become increasingly controlling after Lim's older brother Eugene attempted to cut off Lim's face and got sent to an asylum.

That night, Lim goes to sleep and has a vivid, lucid dream. In the dream, which takes place at the school, she encounters Shinozaki, who tells Lim the dream is real. She teaches Lim how to summon a weapon, after which they team up and fight a dog monster prowling around the school. When the monster hurts Lim, Shinozaki assures her any wounds will be healed when she wakes up. However, if she dies in the dream, she dies in real life. Shinozaki warns Lim that soon a dangerous entity called the Dummy Man will arrive at the school; they'll need to work together to defeat him.

The conceit is traditionally urban fantasy in the sense that it takes place in a realistic modern setting with a secret underbelly of monsters the hero fights at night. It draws, obviously, on the magical girl genre, which makes sense given my goal was to recreate Fargo, but also takes elements from a horror anime I had watched recently that totally rocked my world: Blood-C.



My goal was to give the urban fantasy premise a horror tone. Other than the monster fights, the Dummy Man is a creepy guy walking around with a ventriloquist dummy; the dummy is the sentient one and the man just a puppet.

The central twist revolved around how Lim acquired her magical powers. To describe it as simply as possible, powers spread via It Follows rules.

It Follows is a horror film in which a woman, after having sex during a date, starts being pursued by a shapeshifting monster that constantly walks toward her. The only way to stop being chased is to have sex with someone else, at which point the monster will chase that person instead. It's one of the early examples of the metaphorical horror craze that would sweep the decade.

In 1 Over X's original draft, powers were spread via sex. When Lim woke up at the beginning of the story in Shinozaki's room, it was because Shinozaki had drugged and raped her, thus giving her powers. Spreading powers this way didn't directly copy them; it transferred half of your powers to the person you had sex with. The only way to get power back was to kill the person you spread them to. Shinozaki had slept with the Dummy Man to steal half his powers, and now he was pursuing her to get them back; unable to beat the Dummy Man herself, Shinozaki slept with Lim to give herself an element of surprise.

The title 1 Over X referred to how the whole of magical power, 1, is divided into increasingly small portions—one half, one quarter, and so on.

There it was! Fargo recreated!

I wrote 16,000 words of Draft 1 and got stuck. After the Dummy Man arrived, I didn't know what to do next. In addition to how powers spread, I had one other twist in mind, which was that Cherry Corbett also had powers. But I wasn't sure how to continue the plot, or how to prolong the Dummy Man conflict once it reached its initial confrontation. Without the overwhelming confidence of Modern Cannibals, I second-guessed every decision. I scrapped the draft and immediately began Draft 2.

Draft 2, which ended up at 18,000 words, is basically the same story as Draft 1 with the scenes rearranged so Lim wakes up in the dream world immediately. This was, in fact, a strictly worse way of telling the story, exhibiting a complete lack of patience on my part. Though I tried to make the plot more complicated, first by better foreshadowing Cherry Corbett (she summons giant bugs) and second by adding a scene where the Dummy Man attacks Lim at her house, I quickly grew frustrated.

I still wanted to make it work. I had made the bad decision of going on Twitter and telling my 10 followers my next book would be an urban fantasy story set in Rhode Island, so I felt like I needed to deliver. Clearly, though, there was a problem. I couldn't just wing it like Fargo; going in without a plan caused me to get stuck quickly, and without confidence every snag made me doubt the entire endeavor. After all, was an urban fantasy modeled on It Follows really a good idea?

So I decided to make some changes.

V. 1 Over X, Draft 3 (2017)

Enid Lim was now schizophrenic.

This development had been It Followsing me for some time. Since that final summer before I went to college, the idea of writing a story about schizophrenia bounced, vaguely, in my mind. Maybe a nonfiction account of what happened to Dan, or maybe a dramatized version. In contrast to the typical Hollywood raving lunatic, I wanted to depict schizophrenia with subtlety, where the distorted worldview made sense rather than being self-evidently insane.

The first two drafts of 1 Over X already contained an element of the schizophrenia plotline. Lim's brother was schizophrenic; in the past, believing she was replaced by a doppelganger, he attacked her with a knife. I originally added this backstory without much intention to develop it. It contributed to the horror tone, strained the relationship between Lim and her mother, and explained why the logical and straightlaced Lim never sought help from the authorities (fearing they'd think her insane too). On reflection, I realized this element had much more potential.

The third draft of 1 Over X began with Lim staring at herself in the mirror, experiencing an auditory hallucination of her mother laughing. She knows she's hallucinating, she knows what it means, but she believes that if she sticks to verifiable reality she can control it. She goes to school.

At school, there's still the mysterious transfer student, Shinozaki, whose plotline is mostly the same: she has stolen magic powers and is hiding in the school from people seeking to get them back. The Dummy Man (renamed Murdock) is now accompanied by a partner, Malmaison, who fights with enchanted cigarette smoke; the duo are presented more as magic cops, though the Dummy Man is still a creep. There's also an unseen character named "Cyan Parfait" who uses their magic to close off the school, preventing entry or exit, and fills it with giant praying mantis familiars that hunt Shinozaki. Though the draft never got far enough, Cyan Parfait would have been revealed as the alias of Cherry Corbett.

The mechanism by which magic works is much simpler. Only people who use magic, or people who are insane, can see magic. In the closed off school, only the four magic users and the schizophrenic Enid Lim are aware of the situation. When Lim goes to her first class, the Dummy Man arrives, claiming to be a substitute teacher. Despite his creepy dummy, nobody except Lim notices anything wrong. Thinking it's a tasteless joke, Lim storms off to report the incident to the office, where the Dummy Man—believing Lim must be a magic user in league with Shinozaki—stalks and attacks her. She barely escapes.

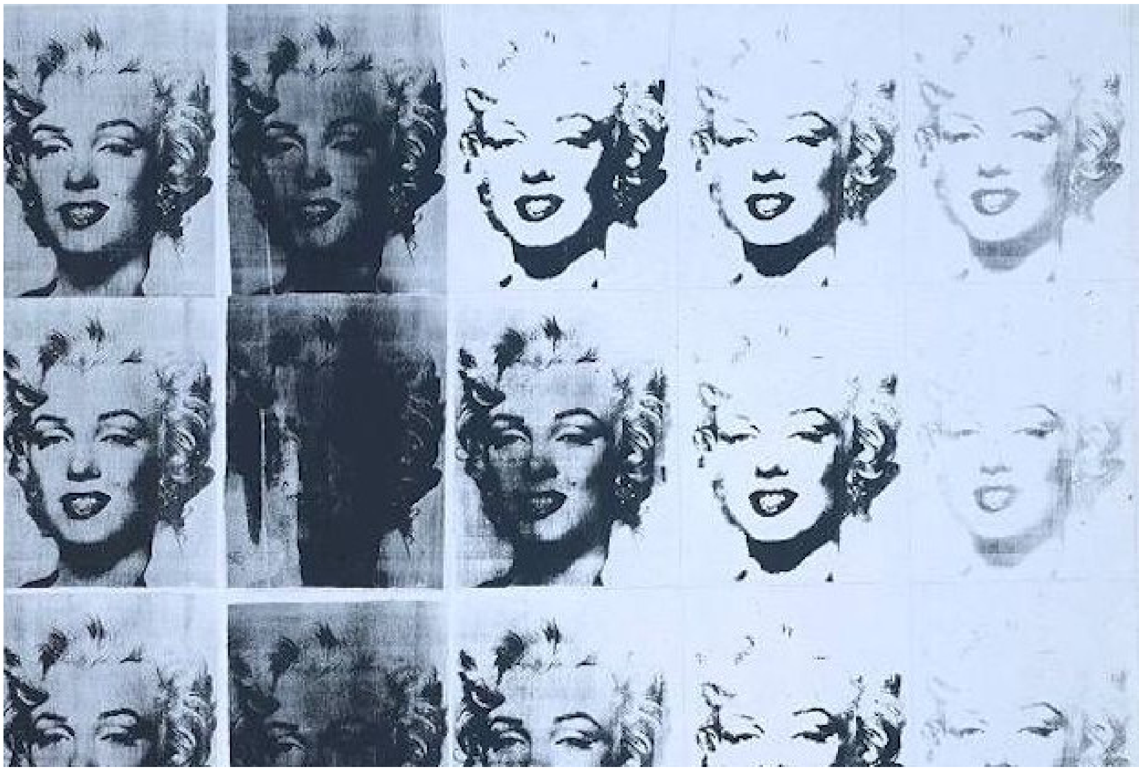
Lim's ability to see magic places her in increasingly dangerous situations, as the other magic users suspect she must be the mysterious Cyan Parfait. Rather than fighting back with magic weapons, like in the previous two drafts, Lim is virtually powerless. She navigates magic battlefields and evades giant praying mantises, all while increasingly questioning her sanity. This change emphasizes the horror element of the story over the urban fantasy, moving 1 Over X away from Fargo in a new direction that subsequent drafts would expand upon.

Shinozaki is more obviously not Lim's friend this time. To compensate—and to provide more warm bodies to terrorize—I gave Lim a real friend, the aforementioned Wintermint. Still an academic rival, Draft 3 Wintermint is more empathetic. In one scene that would carry to the final iteration of the story, she expresses understanding of Lim's mental health struggles and offers to earnestly support her. Lim later helps keep her safe from the monstrous insects plaguing the school, since Wintermint cannot see the danger.

The draft isn't bad. Rereading it, it still has potential. I feel the same about Draft 1. The reason I kept scrapping these drafts was not my writing. It was because my confidence was broken and because I insisted on not planning the plot in advance to imitate Fargo. After 20,000 words, I got stuck again and abruptly gave up. The draft ends with a bizarre sentence, one I do not remember writing, one that is not something I would write. I suspect I heard it somewhere, though where I do not know. It's a baffling end to 1 Over X, at least for the next three years, since this time I would not immediately start another draft. The line reads:

sex is weird my mind just goes haywire and weird memories and phrases pop up and idk

VI. 1 Over X, Draft 4 (2020)



The years following 2017 took a physical and mental toll on me. It was entirely due to my own bad decisions, made in response to my wounded ego. No one decision was too severe, but combined they crushed me.

Failing to recreate Fargo in 1 Over X, I decided on a more straightforward approach: Fargo's sequel. Under ordinary conditions, the effort of writing Chicago would not have been a big deal; I've written longer works in shorter time. But I wrote it concurrent to a bad relationship I felt duty-bound to stay in, and constant spam from a hate mailer I was too prideful to ignore, and a stupid drama-filled fan fiction contest I sought to dominate to feel better about myself.

By mid-2019, when I finished Chicago, I was decimated by fatigue. There were times I was convinced it wasn't possible for me to finish. I named Chicago's final arc Hell Arc because that was what I felt like. My energy was gone. I felt physically weak. I developed stress-related health issues. I was lethargic, my brain permanently fogged. I thought my mind was degenerating.

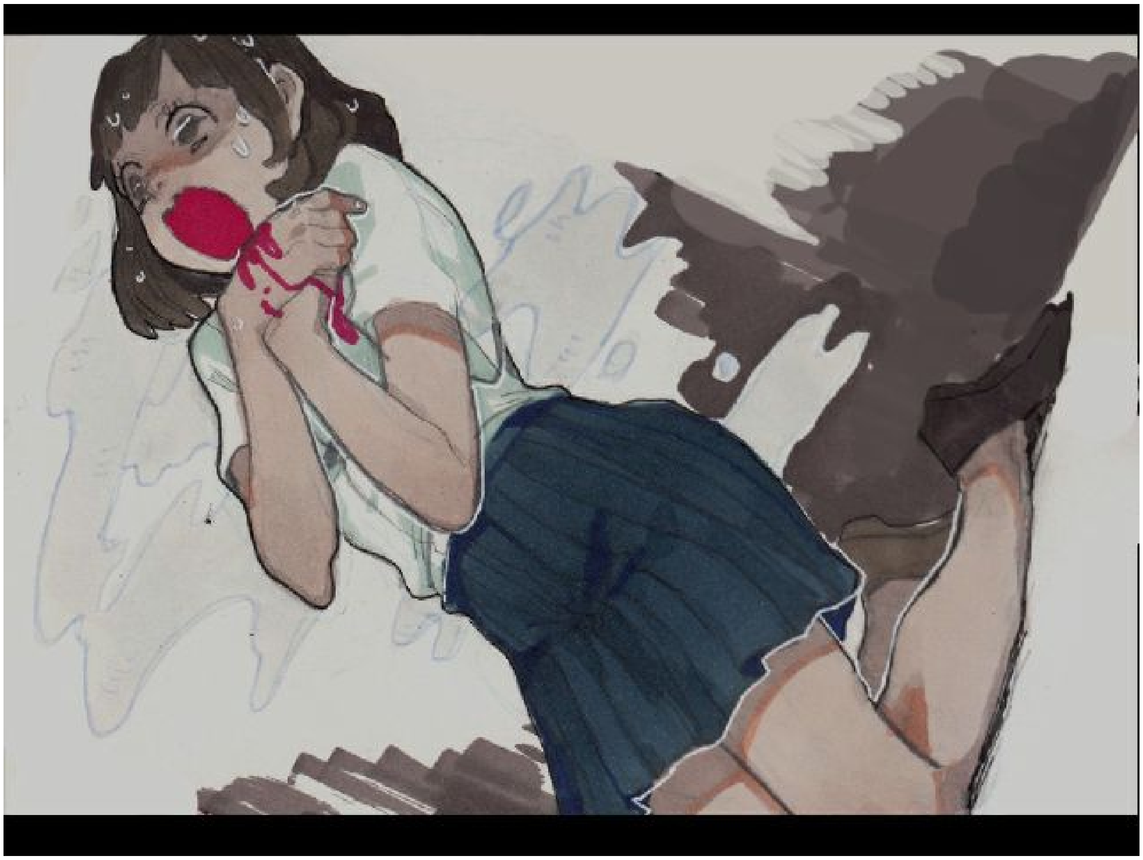
I worried I had become like Andrew Hussie, permanently burnt out, incapable of creating anything unless heavily assisted by amanuensis. I wasn't sure if I would be mentally sharp enough to write ever again.

COVID helped, since I got to work from home. I dedicated myself to recovery. No longer needing to drive into the office, I had more time to read and exercise. My relationship, though still troubled and isolating, weathered its worst period. I turned off anonymous asks to reduce my exposure to my hate mailer, and limited my participation in the fanfic competition. None of these issues fully went away until 2024, but the improvement was massive. By late 2020, I attempted to write again.

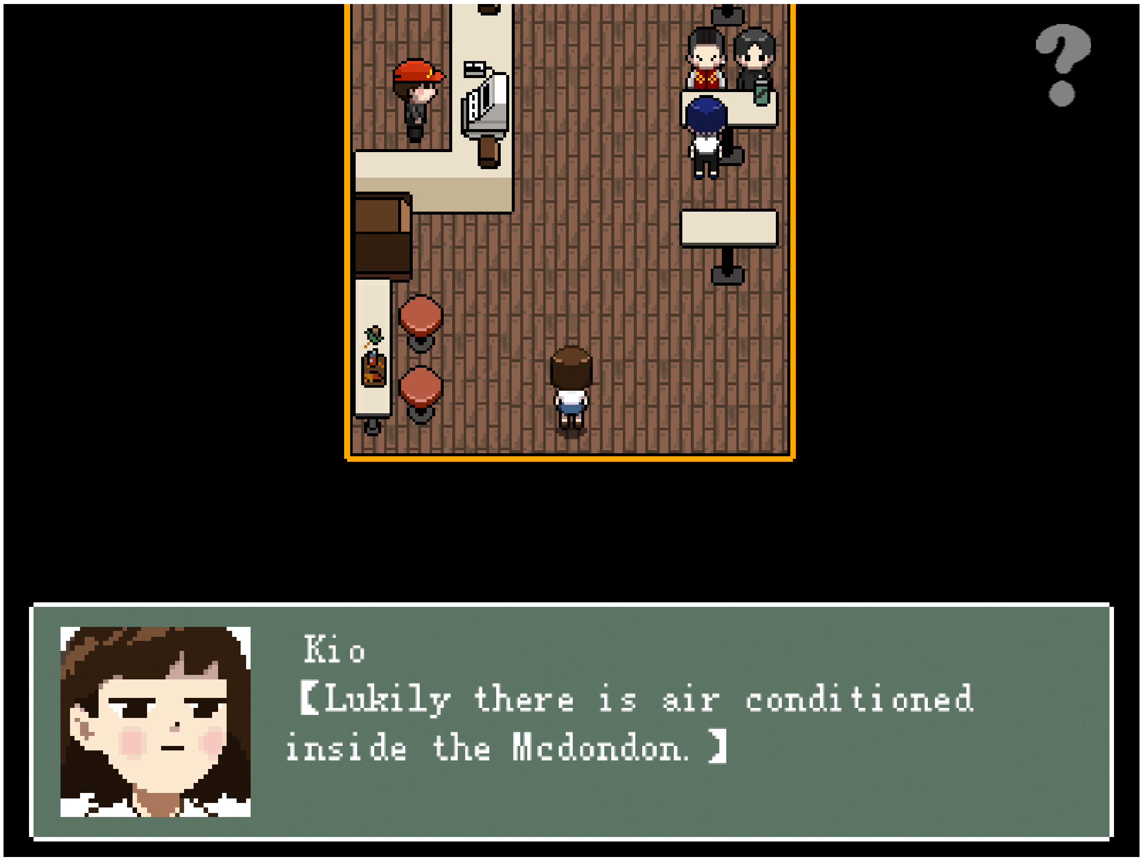
I couldn't do anything too complex. I still felt mentally weak. I decided to write a simple story, maybe 70,000 words max, hewing to a well-trodden genre. I scoured my old ideas (since coming up with a new one seemed impossible), and found one I thought might make for a simple, uncomplex, unambitious return to form. That idea was Cockatiel x Chameleon.

I won't go into detail here, but I originally conceived of Cockatiel x Chameleon as a straightforward romance with minimal complications. That was the version I attempted to write in 2020, and combined with my general weakness it was atrocious. After 60,000 words I trashed it. Okay, I thought, romance isn't my forte. What if I wrote something more intuitively up my alley, a genre I actually enjoy? Something like horror.

So I returned to 1 Over X.



Draft 4 of 1 Over X sheds the urban fantasy element entirely. It is now solely a horror story. Its main point of inspiration came from watching the YouTuber ManlyBadassHero play a game called Kio's Adventure. The game is a senseless parade of inexplicable gore and torture inflicted upon teenage girls, mingling grotesque violence with rancid sexual material to create the exact stomach-churning trashiness I consider the essence of horror. This despite the game's obvious non-budget and laughable dialogue.



Kio

【Lukily there is air conditioned inside the Mcdondon.】

The plot of Kio's Adventure is that Kio and her friends are eating in an air conditioned Mcdondon when everyone in the entire city (world?) is transported to a hellish version of reality. No explanation is given why. Kio's friends are hooked up to torture devices; Kio must navigate an evil world of traps and monsters to attempt to save them. Corpse Party, which already (in OVA form, since I never played the game) significantly influenced 1 Over X, at least used the excuse of an occult ritual to deposit its characters in Hell School. Kio's Adventure dispenses with pretense.

I saw it and thought, look how easy it is to write a horror story! You don't need to think at all. That was exactly what I needed in my enervated state, the story I could write without thinking.

Draft 4 established many elements that would persist to the final version of the story. All Saints Academy was now a boarding school exclusively, and Lim lived on campus with Tate Wintermute as her roommate. (Though I renamed Wintermute in my mind, her name never actually appears in the draft; Lim only refers to her as her "roommate.") Wintermute's character is similar to her final version, a haughty rich girl whom the other students dislike. Cherry Corbett is now a crude jock. Ryan is introduced, though her first name is Gina and she's a jock like Corbett. Ryan and Corbett are always together, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern style. The only difference between them is Corbett is fixated on sex and Ryan is fixated on violence. There's also a Holtzclaw (first name Olivia), though she has Amy Weaver's drug dealer personality. I sought to create simple, stock characters, upon whom incredible violence could be inflicted.

The story opens identically to the final draft. Enid Lim, unable to sleep due to Wintermute's moaning (and auditory hallucinations of her mother laughing at her), goes for a walk to a corner of the school where she can use the internet. En route she discovers a hole in the wall that shouldn't be there. Lim retains her backstory with her brother, but this time I intended to reveal she invented the story out of fear of his schizophrenia. This change drew more authentically upon my experience with Dan, who was never dangerous, though in my anxiety I once feared would become so.

Otherwise, the story is much different. On the other side of the hole, Lim doesn't meet herself, but a freshman performing an occult ritual. The next day, Lim witnesses the same freshman kill herself by jumping off a school building.

The story would have two distinct halves. The first half would be slow, atmospheric, ambiguous. It would build tension and unease. Then, at a certain point, the ritual that the freshman performed would be complete, and the entire school would be transported to a Kio's Adventure-style Hell Arc, kicking off a gory second half as characters are dispatched one by one.

Ultimately, I planned for Lim, Wintermute, and Corbett (Ryan having succumbed to madness and transforming into a murderous fiend) to reach the hole in the wall, which they think is the only way out. The hole is closed. Wintermute, less sympathetic in this version (more like Ursula Yocum, a character that keeps unexpectedly surviving), gets the idea that Lim's schizophrenia is the true cause of everything. Killing her, she thinks, is the only way to end it. Corbett initially stops her, but Lim—believing she is being punished for the lie she told about her brother—acquiesces to being falsely condemned for her own mental illness. After Wintermute sacrifices her, the hole opens up. Corbett and Wintermute escape as the only survivors.

The concept was simple, a single parabola of buildup and release. And the tone I set was effective enough. I liked what I wrote, even then. The problem was I remained too physically and mentally drained. After 10,000 words, the idea of writing an entire novel daunted me. I couldn't do it. Like the three drafts before it, I discarded it.

I told myself I would return to it in the future.

VII. The VVitch

Four years passed.

By 2024, I had written two more novels (Cockatiel x Chameleon and Cleveland Quixotic). At the beginning of the year, my seven-year relationship finally ended—ended amicably, even. In June, I finished the first draft of my next novel, When I Win the World Ends. It seemed as though I had completely recovered.

Things weren't exactly great, though. After my relationship ended, I looked around and realized I had slowly become isolated from everyone around me. Friendships from before the relationship were completely gone, new ones sparse. I was never good at making friends, and not knowing anyone makes it harder to know new people.

I wasn't outright miserable, but I felt resigned. My fate was to be alone, and that was okay. My stories were never going to be as successful as Fargo, and that was okay. The few people I did talk to were aspiring authors who looked up to me, and I thought that by mentoring them, they might achieve the success that eluded me, and help push web fiction forward in a way I was never able to. I wasn't happy, but it would do.

During the editing process for When I Win, I decided to add Sabrina to the story to pay off some earlier foreshadowing and give a climactic chapter more punch. The concept for Sabrina's character came quickly and naturally as a somewhat autobiographical representation of myself, an isolated 30-something with zero prospects for future connections with other people, eluding outright misery but foreseeing her own doom. This concept compelled me so much I didn't want to limit it to a single chapter in a larger story. So, between editing sessions, I wrote a short story that revolved entirely around Sabrina.

The details of the story aren't important to 1 Over X. What matters is the style. Since Sabrina was such a personal character, I got the idea to write her story not in close third person past, but first person present.

This may seem like a trivial difference, but to me it was a radical departure. I have written many novels. All of them use third person, past tense. First person seemed too singleminded. It emphasized the speaker above all else, and I preferred ensemble casts with prominent minor characters over stories where the protagonist was the center of attention. But since the Sabrina story was a short story (a type of story I rarely wrote), it seemed appropriate.

Sabrina's narration was sedate, logical, and matter-of-fact. I found it easy to write, and even pulled off a few fun tricks with it, like using Sabrina's telepathic powers to convey the thoughts of other characters in the narration and slowly blend them with Sabrina's own thoughts. Before long, I started thinking how I might use this style for a more ambitious project. I wasn't exactly sure what I wanted to write after When I Win, though I had a few candidate ideas.

One of those candidates was 1 Over X, which remained in the back of my mind since the failed 2020 draft. Immediately it seemed like the best fit. Not only did Sabrina's voice have the same calm, rational tone as Enid Lim's, but a first person perspective would enable more interesting tricks like those of Sabrina's telepathy when applied to a story about someone with schizophrenia. I also thought a closer, more claustrophobic tone would better align the reader's perspective with that of the character, which would increase the horror.

Convinced, I decided to make one more stab at the story I had been trying and failing to write since 2017.

VIII. 1 Over X, Draft 5 (2024)

Natsuki
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[redacted]

My original goal was to begin the draft as I posted the completed When I Win. I expected, as in 2020, that 1 Over X would be an "easy" story to write, a relaxing diversion after its assiduously planned and plotted predecessor.

Unfortunately, I got sick.

I'm not someone who gets sick often. I never even got COVID. I was a varsity athlete in high school and had not visibly lost my physique since then. But for years my health had slowly declined, something I only noticed in retrospect. I shrugged off warning signs as anomalies, or merely psychological conditions brought on by stress. The years of debilitating fatigue, for instance, I figured were due to "burnout" from working too hard. It's possible stress and working too hard did in fact play a hand in it, but there was more to the story.

About a week before I started posting When I Win, I became ill with a nasty chronic ailment that would persist for months, go away, and then come back. I went to three different doctors—including a specialist—and had a million tests done, but they found nothing diagnosable. Though it's a relief to learn whatever you're suffering from isn't cancer, it's frustrating to lack a clear cure. With no other options, I assumed my problem was general poor health.

In some ways this illness was a good thing, because it caused me to get serious about my health. I improved my diet and began exercising daily, and though progress has been slow, there has been progress. The periods of illness have become shorter, less severe, and longer apart.

I feel bad wasting your time with such pedestrian issues of health, but it's undeniable the onset of this illness significantly impacted my ability to write 1 Over X. Rather than beginning it in August, as I intended, I wasn't able to start Draft 5 until October, when my symptoms finally subsided (for the first time).

And even then, Draft 5 was basically nothing. It is by far the shortest draft, totaling a pathetic 886 words. Under most circumstances I wouldn't even consider it a draft. But it is unique in one particular way, which is that it is written not as a novel but as a script for a visual novel.

I described the Sabrina story as definitively convincing me to write 1 Over X in a certain way, but like most narratives that's tidier than reality. In truth, it presented a compelling option for the story, but there were other options available. Since Cockatiel x Chameleon—where I first considered commissioning light novel-style art for key moments and characters, before deciding on the classical art that begins each chapter—I have thought about ways I could draw more readers via other forms of media. People just don't gravitate to pure text the way they do a video, a picture, or a game.

And horror is so much easier to make effective in visual format. You can just flash a spooky image on the screen and play a sound effect and scare someone, whereas purely textual horror must be more cerebral. The idea of doing 1 Over X as a visual novel seemed possible. At the very least, I thought, I could write a script and use it to generate interest—and artists—to create an actual visual novel.

Other than being in script form, Draft 5 is similar to the beginning of Draft 4 and the beginning of the final draft. Lim can't sleep, leaves her room to use the internet, discovers a hole (at which point the draft ends). The only notable addition is something I describe in the text as a "Phone Minigame," which would have involved Lim at the edge of the school pulling up her phone to access a social media site. Players could scroll through the feed for an absurdly long time, finding increasingly bizarre and disturbing posts the deeper they delved. They could exit the feed at any time, at which point the story would continue.

This was the first of what I expected would be many attempts at using the visual novel medium in creative ways, but it also killed the draft. When I tried to write the social media feed itself, I immediately got stuck. For my idea of infinite scrolling to work, I needed thousands of words of fake tweets. The task daunted me, especially since it would distract me from the actual narrative I intended to write. I figured I could skip it and write it later, so I put a placeholder, but I've always hated writing a story out of order, and skipping a part signals to me I'm not actually serious enough about the story yet. (In the first draft of Cockatiel x Chameleon, I initially skipped over one of the pornographic scenes, and that also caused me to doubt the project.)

Given I was testing an experimental script style, my seriousness *was* pretty shallow. Maybe a visual novel wasn't the way to go, I thought. It was outside my area of expertise, and who would do the art and music anyway? Tepidly, I scrapped the draft before it really began. It wouldn't be long before I started another.

IX. Last Minute Influences

Este es un monumento a mi persona.

This is a monument to my person.

Drafts 6 and 7 together make up the "final draft" of 1 Over X. Draft 6 covers everything up until Lim and her friends reach The Breakers in Chapter 9. Then I took a short break, made some substantial revisions, and continued with Draft 7, which covers the rest of the story.

Since I've finally started discussing the version of the story the readers are familiar with, I'll go into the more immediate influences on it. While It Follows and Kio's Adventure helped mold the basic details of earlier drafts, and some of what came out of those earlier drafts stayed in the story, the final version of 1 Over X was more significantly impacted by several things I read or watched in the year leading up to writing it.

(This is typical for me. For example, though When I Win was influenced by a lifetime of interests, much of the ultimate shape of the story came about in response to Haruki Murakami's Underground, which I read only a few months before I started writing.)

In February 2024, I reread several Shakespeare plays, including Macbeth. Before, I'd considered Macbeth inferior to Hamlet and King Lear, but this time I appreciated it much more. In my college Shakespeare class a decade earlier, my professor put especial emphasis on the phrase "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" spoken by the witches. In context, the line makes obvious sense; the witches find what other people find fair to be foul and vice versa. My professor pointed out, though, that the line is complete nonsense when read on its own. It is paradoxical in a tautological way, emphasizing the inversion of the natural order that occurs after Macbeth takes the throne. In the intervening years, I had seen a random post on Tumblr discussing how JRR Tolkien despised the ending of Macbeth, where the prophecies for Macbeth's downfall have anticlimactically mundane explanations.

(According to the post, this is the reason for the Ents—an *actual* walking forest.) My reread caused me to connect these two points—the paradoxical, nonsensical beginning and the banal, mundane ending—and reach the thesis of Lim's essay on Macbeth in the story. This thesis would guide much of 1 Over X's plot, including its ending where Corbett seemingly stops the madness by sealing the hole with metal plates and construction equipment.

In May 2024, I read American Psycho by Bret Easton Ellis for the first time. I had previously seen the movie, and also previously read Less Than Zero (twice). Though I thought Less Than Zero was kind of awful, I found American Psycho significantly more compelling. It is the main influence on the first person present perspective used in the Sabrina story and later 1 Over X. (American Psycho also opens with a perspectival "trick"; for the first few pages, the story seems to be a third person account of a different character, before Patrick Bateman slowly fades into existence.)

American Psycho and a recent reread of Less Than Zero made me contemplate Ellis' impact on contemporary American literature, where he wields outsized influence via acolytes like Ottessa Moshfegh and Tao Lin. He wrote Less Than Zero as a college creative writing workshop student, and as such the college creative writing workshop crowd tends to adore him. More than that, though, Ellis is a signifier of a much larger shift in focus for American letters on the whole. The big names of the 90s and early 00s were authors of what would be pejoratively named "hysterical realism," a term coined by critic James Wood in a review of Zadie Smith's White Teeth. To Wood, hysterical realism meant big, bombastic works, with hundreds of characters spanning different countries and time periods, works where "information was the main character." Authors like David Foster Wallace, Salman Rushdie, Roberto Bolaño, and late-career Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo all fit this mold. To Wood, these works were abject failures because they failed to depict the detailed character work of the realist novels of the 1800s. To me, these works were the natural attempt to reflect the world in the Age of Information. Ours is a globalized world, a world where we must, in fact, grapple with an explosion of cultures and encrusted historical epochs, where the news buzzes constantly with ridiculous headlines cherrypicked from the 8 billion souls inhabiting the planet. If "information is the main character" of these works, that is only a failure insomuch as these works are failing to identically replicate works from a much different time.

Hysterical realism would fall out of fashion in the mid-00s. Wallace and Bolaño died tragically young, Pynchon and DeLillo got old, Zadie Smith had her feelings hurt by Wood's essay and pivoted to a different style, and Rushdie got fatwa'd. What replaced the attempt to grapple with the Age of Information was instead, in my view, a retreat from it, a literary white flight into the gated community of the self, specifically the self of the increasingly isolated and elite literary caste. The true signifier of this shift was not Ellis, whose most notable works predate it, but Karl Ove Knausgaard, famous for his interminably long series of "autofiction" (autobiographical fiction) novels where he places his life under a microscope, delving into its every banal crevice, seeking truth only in his immediately perceived reality and psychology. It is a rejection of anything other in exchange for infinite fascination with one's own self.

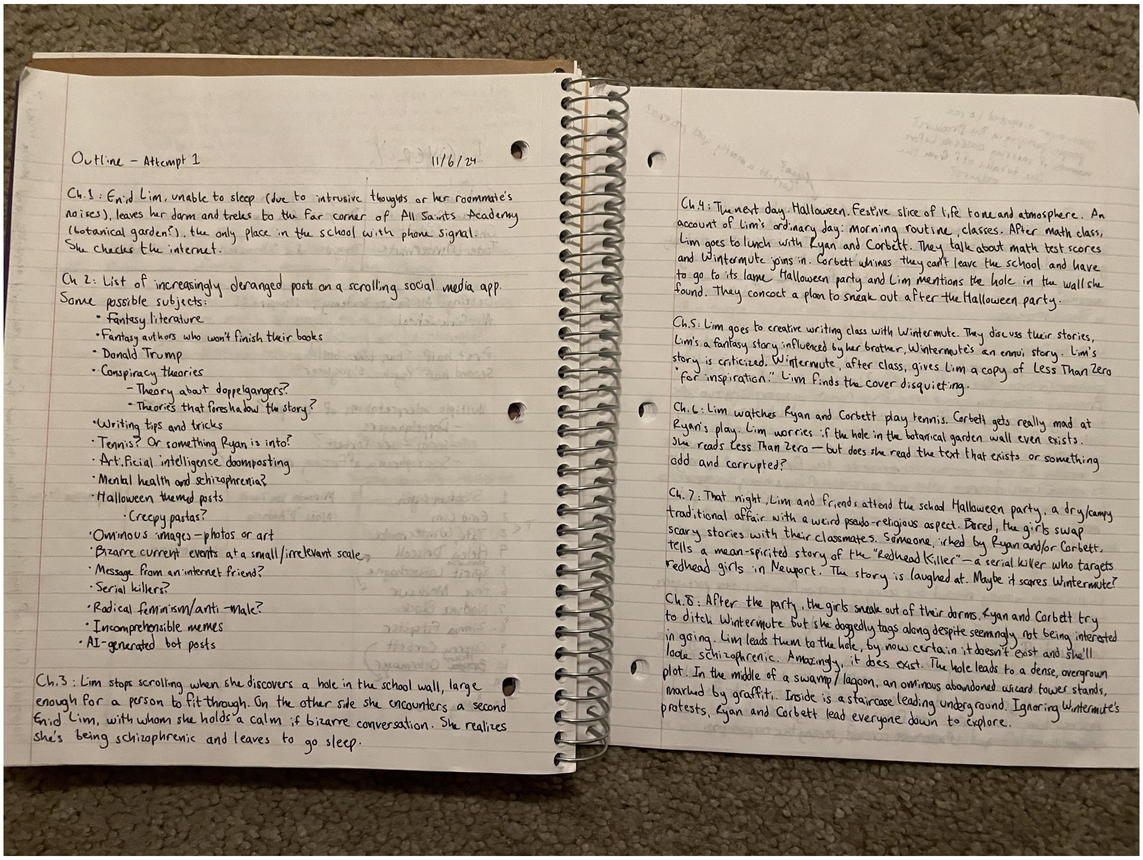
Knausgaard caused a trend, though he did not originate the idea; Bret Easton Ellis was writing in much the same gated community style decades earlier, with the added punch of the lurid drugs-and-sex lifestyle of the rich and famous. (Even Ellis is not the true originator; his own Less Than Zero is a close imitation of Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays.)

All this is to say that American Psycho caused me to contemplate the direction of literature as a retreat from reality rather than an attempt to grapple with and understand it, an emphatic celebration of the self at the expense of everything else. This, too, would become a core concern of 1 Over X, not only through Less Than Zero's literal appearance in the story and the creative writing workshop satire, but in the conception of All Saints Academy as a "closed circle," where the daughters of the rich and influential are contained without interference from anything outside. In previous drafts, I conceived of the school being magically "closed off" for purposes of the plot; now, the school was closed off by default, and for a reason beyond pure horror.

The last major influence is Valle Verde, an analog horror series I already wrote an essay about in July 2024. You can read my essay for a more detailed explanation of what I took from it, but my thesis is similar to what I got from Bret Easton Ellis: An attempt to flee the chaotic, bombastic Age of Information by changing postmodern noise into a riddle that can be solved by a cloyingly simple narrative. It even corresponds to my interpretation of Macbeth: "fixing" an inverted world by disappointingly mundane means.

That was the thread. How do people grapple with the endless deluge of information brought upon by the internet? If hysterical realism is a story where "information is the main character," then 1 Over X would be horror where "information is the monster."

X. The Outline



Outline – Attempt 1 11/6/24

Ch. 1: Enid Lim, unable to sleep (due to intrusive thoughts or her roommate's noises), leaves her dorm and treks to the far corner of All Saints Academy (botanical garden?), the only place in the school with phone signal. She checks the internet.

Ch 2: List of increasingly deranged posts on a scrolling social media app. Some possible subjects:

- Fantasy literature
- Fantasy authors who won't finish their books
- Donald Trump
- Conspiracy theories
  - Theory about doppelgangers?
  - Theories that foreshadow the story?
- Writing tips and tricks
- Tennis? Or something Ryan is into?
- Artificial intelligence doomposting
- Mental health and schizophrenia?
- Halloween themed posts
  - Creepy pastas?
- Ominous images – photos or art
- Bizarre current events at a small/irrelevant scale
- Message from an internet friend?
- Serial killers?
- Radical feminism/anti-male?
- Incomprehensible memes
- AI-generated bot posts

Ch. 3: Lim stops scrolling when she discovers a hole in the school wall, large enough for a person to fit through. On the other side she encounters a second Enid Lim, with whom she holds a calm if bizarre conversation. She realizes she's being schizophrenic and leaves to go sleep.

Ch. 4: The next day. Halloween. Festive slice of life tone and atmosphere. An account of Lim's ordinary day: morning routine, classes. After math class, Lim goes to lunch with Ryan and Corbett. They talk about math test scores and Wintermute joins in. Corbett whines they can't leave the school and have to go to its lame Halloween party and Lim mentions the hole in the wall she found. They concoct a plan to sneak out after the Halloween party.

Ch. 5: Lim goes to creative writing class with Wintermute. They discuss their stories, Lim's a fantasy story influenced by her brother, Wintermute's an ennui story. Lim's story is criticized. Wintermute, after class, gives Lim a copy of Less Than Zero "for inspiration." Lim finds the cover disquieting.

Ch. 6: Lim watches Ryan and Corbett play tennis. Corbett gets really mad at Ryan's play. Lim worries if the hole in the botanical garden wall even exists. She reads Less Than Zero — but does she read the text that exists or something odd and corrupted?

Ch. 7: That night, Lim and friends attend the school Halloween party, a dry/campy traditional affair with a weird pseudo-religious aspect. Bored, the girls swap scary stories with their classmates. Someone, irked by Ryan and/or Corbett, tells a mean-spirited story of the "Redhead Killer" – a serial killer who targets redhead girls in Newport. The story is laughed at. Maybe it scares Wintermute?

Ch. 8: After the party, the girls sneak out of their dorms. Ryan and Corbett try to ditch Wintermute but she doggedly tags along despite seemingly not being interested in going. Lim leads them to the hole, by now certain it doesn't exist and she'll look schizophrenic. Amazingly, it does exist. The hole leads to a dense, overgrown plot. In the middle of a swamp/lagoon, an ominous abandoned wizard tower stands, marked by graffiti. Inside is a staircase leading underground. Ignoring Wintermute's protests, Ryan and Corbett lead everyone down to explore.

In November, shortly after the failure of Draft 5, I decided to do something I never do and write a chapter-by-chapter outline of the story. I forget exactly what prompted me to do this. Possibly it was nothing more than how many drafts had already failed due to lack of planning. (Usually, when I write a story, I keep everything in my head, with the justification that if I forget it, it wasn't worth remembering.)

The outline is not a perfect representation of what happens in the story, especially in its later parts, but it did codify many aspects of the plot. I used the opening of Draft 4 as a basis, but decided to abandon the Corpse Party-like satanic ritual that initiated the horror in Draft 4 in favor of a plot that emphasized the inside-outside dynamic of the "closed circle" of the school. I felt this would better capture my thoughts about the interiority of art and its refusal to interface with the world at large.

As such, the overall structure of the plot changed from Draft 4's simple "build tension, release tension" to a twin-peaked structure. Lim and friends would leave the school through the hole in the wall, experience some crazy stuff at a party in town, and return unwittingly bringing back the horror of outside, which would then run rampant throughout the school.

Similarly, I conceived of doppelgangers being the primary vector through which the horror would be delivered. Earlier drafts already flirted with this; from the backstory of Draft 1 Lim's brother thought she was a doppelganger, while in Draft 4 Ryan would have been transformed into a maniacal, murderous form of herself. Here, the idea carried more weight in the context of the internet/information theme. Similar to Royce Ru's speech about The Enigma of Amigara Fault in Cockatiel x Chameleon, the doppelganger would be a deranged version of someone that emerges once strained through the solipsistic and information-dense filter of the internet.

Originally, my idea was that Lim and her three friends would leave the school and go to a random house party in Newport. They would be attacked by some male partygoers and flee, with Ryan being replaced by a doppelganger in the commotion. However, when I mentioned the setting of my story to a friend who lives in Connecticut, he remarked that he went to Newport often for the summer, and that I should look into the Gilded Age mansions the city is famous for. This is how I learned about The Breakers. (My friend also told me about the abandoned plot of land with the ominous, graffiti-strewn wizard's tower—which is a real place—as well as the tunnels that connect the town's mansions.)

The outline covers the story's first two arcs mostly accurately to the final version. It established the four boys and the Gorehound, which I designed to maintain the plausible deniability of it being a Halloween costume as long as possible. I wanted The Breakers sequence to play on Lim's schizophrenia, to make her constantly doubt the things around her, even as they became increasingly real. That was the main goal behind the headless body Lim encounters, which could easily be either Ryan, Corbett, or a mannequin.

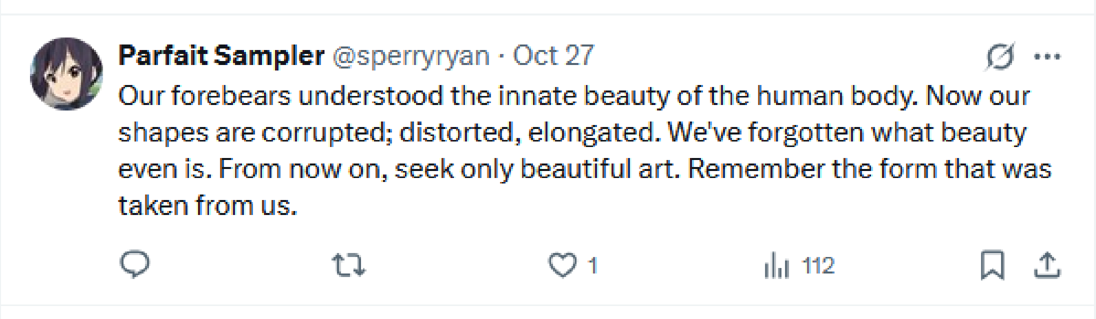
The story after The Breakers had a less clear vision. What appears in the final story as Part III Part I was in the outline only a couple of vaguely-described chapters, with Miranda Van Zandt and Prue Malheur absent. Part III Part II opens similarly in the outline to its final form, with a second Wintermute appearing and being taken to the office. One of Draft 3's biggest horror scenes is when Lim goes to the office to report the Dummy Man, only for him to attack her, and since then I always wanted to do a big horror scene in the office. In Draft 4, I planned a scene where the principal attempted to muster the faculty to protect the students, only for everyone to get slaughtered by monsters. The iteration that appeared in the outline was similar, except now the monster was Wintermute's doppelganger.

I also knew I wanted to write an homage to the spider scene in Blood-C, one of my favorite horror works, so I planned the scene in which Noël D'Addario tries to warn everyone in the dorms before the Gorehound appears. In the outline, the scene has a metafictional bent, with D'Addario seemingly wresting narrative control from Lim via Scream-like horror meta-awareness. This concept would ultimately develop into Lim's increased omniscient perspective in Part III Part II.

The biggest difference in the outline is what happens after. Lim and the real Wintermute flee by themselves through the school, fighting and killing Wintermute's doppelganger before Lim's doppelganger arrives and kidnaps the real Wintermute. Lim would then join Corbett, who musters a group of survivors (including Ryan) to seal the hole. At the story's climax, the other doppelgangers attack Corbett's group at the hole, into which water from the storm is draining. Lim and Ryan fall into the water and are washed out of the school before Corbett successfully seals the hole shut. Trapped outside, Ryan sobs, "devastated at her ejection, surprisingly vulnerable." Lim finds her own doppelganger in the wizard's tower, torturing Wintermute. Jealous of their friendship, Lim's doppelganger executes Wintermute; the story ends with a devastated Lim being cradled and protected by her doppelganger as the evils of the outside world close in on them.

I didn't immediately start writing the next draft after I finished the outline, because Fargo's 10th anniversary was coming and I had the idea to release an edited version, Fargo DX. I spent much of the next few months on that, only to realize it was a larger undertaking than I expected. Not wanting to delay my next novel any longer, I pivoted to 1 Over X's sixth draft in the last week of 2024.

XI. 1 Over X, Draft 6 (2024-2025)



Parfait Sampler @sperryryan · Oct 27

Our forebears understood the innate beauty of the human body. Now our shapes are corrupted; distorted, elongated. We've forgotten what beauty even is. From now on, seek only beautiful art. Remember the form that was taken from us.

Draft 6 covers the story up until Chapter 9, the arrival at The Breakers. Most of this early part was actually easy to write, since it cleaved close to my outline and contained iterations on several scenes from previous drafts, such as the American Psycho business card riff. By this time I also had a strong grasp on the characters of Lim, Wintermute, and Corbett. Of the core cast, only Ryan was tricky, since I changed her a lot from her jock personality in Draft 4 to better encapsulate the self-contradictory reactionary postmodernism I saw in Valle Verde.

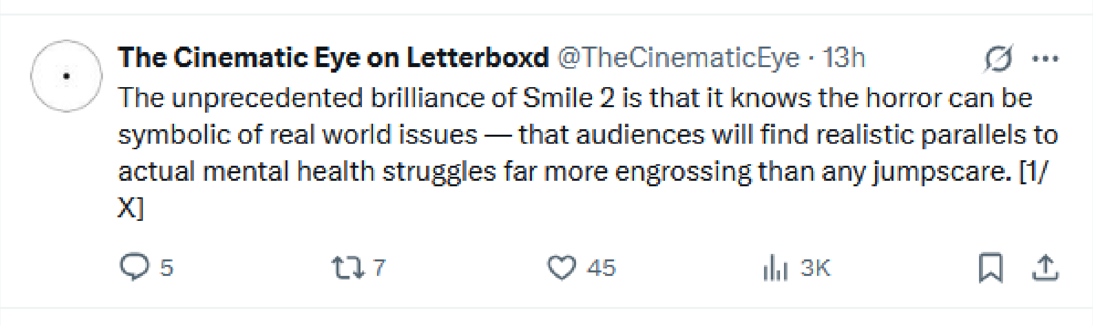
My goal with the characters, both major and minor, was for them to feel anonymous and interchangeable, names that the reader would struggle to keep track of. I was borrowing this technique from Bret Easton Ellis, whose novels are stuffed with generic first-name-only non-characters (and which he parodies in American Psycho when everyone keeps confusing Patrick Bateman for other people). I felt this technique would be good for horror. In my opinion, horror works much better when characters feel expendable. In fact, I think traditionally good character writing can detract from horror rather than improve it.

Despite the injection of new themes, my foremost goal was for this story to succeed as horror. I was less concerned with plot, which I also think can detract from horror, and more about feel and tone. Blood-C remained my aspirational focus: gradually building tension culminating in explosions of horrendous violence. To accomplish that, I struggled against my impulse to constantly keep the story moving forward. The early part of 1 Over X was designed to be slow-paced, though writing it I constantly worried it was *too* slow-paced. I had recently read The Flower That Bloomed Nowhere by Lurina and was emboldened by that story's willingness to spend unlimited amounts of time as its characters walk to the location where the story is actually set, discussing along the way philosophical ideas about death. The chapter in which Lim and friends walk to The Breakers and argue about the purpose of art takes a cue from that story.

I also wanted the order in which characters die to be surprising, which I think is essential to good horror. I deliberately set up Corbett to seem like the "most expendable" of the four friends, a crudely one-dimensional jock whom Lim has little interest in and thus seems ancillary to the action. When the headless body appeared, the reader would be inclined to believe it belonged to Corbett, an inclination bolstered when Ryan's doppelganger arrived shortly afterward. Then, over the course of the story, the very aspects of Corbett that make her seem like a cannon fodder background character transform her into an archetypal action-minded Final Girl.

This trick borrows from Modern Cannibals, which also features a long passage where four friends travel to the story's main setting. Corbett fills a similar role as Cal, who is signaled as vestigial on account of the primary perspective character's dislike of him. Modern Cannibals also leans into a slasher horror mindset during its road trip arc, with Kiki quipping that Cal is the type of person who dies first to increase the tension later when Cal confronts Maximillion and seems actually in danger of dying.

As someone who loves slasher movies, playing with slasher clichés was the fun part of writing. By far the most difficult part to write was Chapter 2, also known as the Twitter chapter.



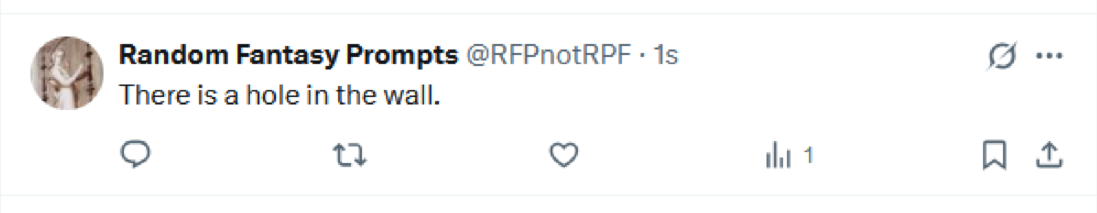
The Cinematic Eye on Letterboxd @TheCinematicEye · 13h

The unprecedented brilliance of Smile 2 is that it knows the horror can be symbolic of real world issues — that audiences will find realistic parallels to actual mental health struggles far more engrossing than any jumpscare. [1/X]

I knew this chapter would be difficult after attempting it in Draft 5. My approach this time was more methodical. In my outline, I listed potential topics the tweets should cover, which gave me a clearer direction to focus my efforts. Even so, Chapter 2 was a nightmare that would receive more revisions than any other chapter.

My first attempt, I wrote tweets with the mindset of "throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what stuck," telling myself I had plenty of time to make changes and that it would be good to at least give myself a base to stand on. I prowled Twitter for inspiration, which actually only discouraged me because no matter how deranged I tried to make a fake tweet seem, real tweets always had me beat. I succumbed a few times and simply put real tweets I found in the story—the Novak Djokovic anti-vax tweet and the "Pickleball is a microcosm of everything wrong with modernity" tweet are two examples—but I limited how often I did this, preferring to use original tweets.

I asked for help from my friends. The Fargo-level success of When I Win the World Ends elevated my profile in the web fiction scene, and a few notable webfic authors took note. Due to this, I was able to become friends with the aforementioned Lurina, as well as expand my acquaintance with Remy (author of Chili and the Chocolate Factory) into daily correspondence. Both of them helped author tweets for me. Lurina created most of the Random Fantasy Prompt tweets, including a couple I didn't wind up using. Remy, meanwhile, gave me an early draft of the Smile 2 review tweet, which I later rewrote and expanded into its current form. (At the time, I had only seen the first Smile, not Smile 2. Remy had also not seen Smile 2.)



Random Fantasy Prompts @RFPnotRPF · 1s

There is a hole in the wall.

Between these and the tweets I wrote myself, I was able to put together a passable first draft of the chapter. It was still missing key tweets that appear in the final draft, but I was willing to move forward under the motto that had become a mantra while writing When I Win—"I'll fix it in post."

More crippling were my persistent worries the story was too slow-paced. It was these worries that caused me to stop writing when Lim and friends reached The Breakers, the first of two major pauses where I reassessed the story's overall direction and tone before proceeding. I don't usually pause like this when writing a draft, preferring to barrel to the end and fix problems during editing. The pauses were more a byproduct of the self-doubt that plagued this project since 2017. Now, I was worried either that my story wasn't "horror" enough or that it was a mistake to attempt to write horror at all. The success of When I Win made me want to expand on that success, and I knew a surreal horror story would not help do that. At the same time, my illness returned, less severe but still a detriment. I distracted myself from 1 Over X by writing the essays I posted over the course of 2025. Ultimately, though, I always returned to 1 Over X, making slow progress but progress nonetheless.

After the first pause, I reread everything I wrote until then and made substantial revisions, mainly to shorten the text so it wouldn't feel so slow. I cut at least 20 percent of the word count, then began writing The Breakers.

XII. 1 Over X, Draft 7 (2025)

The pause did give me the opportunity to do something important: research The Breakers. I knew the basics from what my Connecticut friend told me, but since a significant chunk of the story would be set inside it, I wanted a better idea of its interior and layout. To this end, I decided to watch YouTube video tours of the premises.

My timing was, as Aracely Sosa would say, serendipitous. Only a few months earlier, the YouTuber Erik Van Conover posted a video titled Touring The Most Expensive Gilded Age Mansion in America, a 47-minute tour of The Breakers with professional quality filmmaking, rather than the cellphone camera tours that made up most of my other options.

While the video did give me the important basic information about The Breakers necessary to write my story accurately, its impact was far, far greater than I ever could have expected. I heavily recommend anyone who enjoys 1 Over X to watch the video in its entirety, and it'll quickly become clear why. Erik Van Conover, unbelievably, is not a real person, but a character from the story 1 Over X, somehow manifested into reality. (The "Van" in his name is completely fictitious; his real name is just Erik Conover.) Throughout his tour he cannot help but let slip occasional references to the "spiritual" nature of The Breakers' construction, culminating in a digression where he discusses "sacred geometry." He is, of course, utterly wrong about even the basic facts, constantly making the error I would put into the story in which he points to any flower he sees and describes it as "the flower of life."

The video was also helpful for identifying which of the nine Muses is missing from the Morning Room in The Breakers. Though it is easy enough to learn online that only eight of the nine are present, no source I was able to find after extensive searching tells you which is missing. Thanks to this video's high resolution, though, I was able to sleuth it out by searching the Muses that were present in the background and determining the missing one by process of elimination.

A few months after making this video, while I was writing 1 Over X, Erik Van Conover would have a psychotic break, hit a police officer with his car, and be arrested and put on trial for attempted murder. He decided to represent himself in court, during which he argued that everything was a conspiracy to destroy his reputation because of its prominence as a YouTuber.

NEW YORK MAN CHARGED WITH ATTEMPTED MURDER
FOR ALLEGEDLY HITTING POLICE OFFICER WITH CAR
WMUR 9
47°
6:13

Around the same time, I read Là-Bas by the French author Joris-Karl Huysmans. The novel, written in the late 1800s and part of the so-called "decadent" movement, is blisteringly condemnatory toward modernity, with its main character (a thinly-disguised version of the author) stating that the poorest, most degenerate peasant of the Middle Ages lived a more spiritually fulfilling life than even the well-to-do of the present day. The confidence with which the protagonist considers himself superior to the riffraff of his time is counterbalanced by his genuine credulousness when it comes to occult hucksters; he quite seriously considers seances, spirits, and homeopathy, seeing in them an enlightenment beyond the decrepit rationality of so-called bourgeois sensibility. (The real Huysmans was likewise taken in by a fraudulent priest who promised to protect him from the evil spells of satanists. Later in life, the atheistic Huysmans converted to Catholicism and joined a monastery.)

The world of fin-de-siecle Paris that Huysmans depicts seemed, to me, a mirror of the world I depicted in 1 Over X, with its own seemingly educated and enlightened people all too happy to toss themselves into the arms of pseudoscience and pseudospirituality despite only a piecemeal comprehension of the history they claim to extol. As such, I quickly incorporated elements of Huysmans into my own story, with much of Ryan's doppelganger's dialogue modeled on its ideas. By the same token, the sacrificial crucifixion of her own headless body that Ryan's doppelganger shows the others is modeled on a description in Là-Bas of the Isenheim Altarpiece, a painting of the crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald. Huysmans glorifies the painting's decrepitude, its disgusting and decaying Christ, because for as much as he craves spiritual uplift, he is at the same time obsessed with the grotesque and rotting. This contradictory mindset too worked its way into Ryan.

Meanwhile, the actual layout of the sacrificial chamber—the first fictional room I injected into the otherwise accurate depiction of The Breakers—was modeled on the holes in the ground that appear in Kane Pixels' Backrooms videos:

Otherwise, this arc mostly adhered to my outline, which covered the setpiece murder and the escape from the Gorehound in detail. I deviated only in minor ways, such as by adding the torture chamber under the house; in the outline, the scene played out similarly, but in the kitchen instead. Even the short chapter at the end of the arc was in the outline, conceived as "Lim having a nightmare that something is coming through the hole into the school." At this point, I had not divided the story into seven-chapter parts, so such a short chapter helping each part have the same number of chapters was a fortunate coincidence rather than something I did to fill a quota.

As I mentioned before, my outline became increasingly vague after The Breakers. My lack of certainty in the events of the plot combined with my lack of confidence that I was writing good "horror." I obviously cannot be scared or even unnerved by my own writing, so I had no idea whether what I wrote hit the correct tone. Once again, I paused writing the story.

XIII. Part III Part I

Delthea

Wooould yooouuu pleeeeease
SHUUUUUUUT UUUUUUP?!

For a couple of weeks, I reread what I had written, reassessed my outline, and discussed the story at length with Remy and Lurina. Lurina and I identified that the first part of the story was focused on literature, while the second part was focused on film. The path forward, then, seemed to be to delve into yet another medium, one that had already seen its influence cropping up across the story: the web original world of analog horror.

This decision solidified several ideas I had considered but never formally included in my outline. First was that I should actually show the content of the meta-film Gorehound III. I introduced the film as part of Noël D'Addario's character, anticipating when she later hijacks the narrative. Lim believing she is being stalked by its monster was inspired by someone I knew who told me they were paranoid Art the Clown from the Terrifier franchise was stalking them, even though they hadn't seen the film. (This person would also tell me their parents once hid their cellphone in the microwave to protect them from 5G, an anecdote that also appeared in 1 Over X.)

I've enjoyed writing stories-within-stories since Faerie Endless in Modern Cannibals. The contents of Gorehound III I envisioned as a cross between a traditional splatterhouse slasher and an ascended analog horror film like Skinamarink. The film's description includes references to the Kane Pixels Backrooms videos (the freeze frame when the first Entity attacks), The Shining (the boiler explosion finale, which is in the book but not the film), Blood-C (a character being ripped in half by the vulva), and The Curse (the description of far away camera angles). Miranda's interpretation of the story includes a classic analog horror satanist conspiracy, the type favored by both Valle Verde and Joris-Karl Huysmans.

Miranda is not in the story's outline, though her name does appear in an early list of students that predates the outline. I was not certain what role she would have until late in development, though I did write both her tweet and her appearance as a sheeted ghost during Draft 6, fully aware it was her. I wanted the school to seem "different" when Lim and friends returned to it after The Breakers, which I planned to accomplish by introducing important characters who did not seem to exist before. This trick is borrowed from the otherwise uninteresting Draft 2, where Corbett appears only near the end of the draft.

As for Miranda herself, she has a much different history than most of my characters. Her name evokes Miranda Vanadzorian, the main character of 2017's Useless, but she is otherwise nothing like that character. Instead, Miranda Van Zandt is a character I played in a tabletop RPG campaign in 2020. The campaign was for Chronicles of Darkness, specifically a homebrewed version that enabled parties of various different supernatural creatures (you're usually supposed to have only one type in a party). Miranda was a demon, which in the world of CoD is a mechanical component that has broken off the God-machine. To avoid angels that still work for the God-machine, they take human disguises and blend into society.

For her picture, I used an image of Delthea from Fire Emblem: Shadows of Valentia. The description of her appearance in 1 Over X is unchanged.

Miranda was a teenage girl from a wealthy family, which is what initially made me think of putting her in the story. At first, my goal was only to reuse her name, which had a New York old money Dutch sound to it (compare to Van Patten in American Psycho, or the Vanderbilts of The Breakers fame). But during the campaign, I played Miranda as obsessed with Five Nights at Freddy's and MatPat lore videos, which helped her express occult interests without arousing suspicion. Now that the analog horror elements of 1 Over X were becoming prominent, I decided to include a more intact version of Miranda. Her introduction, in which she browbeats Lim into accepting her transfer student story, evokes the mechanic in CoD by which demons alter reality by changing the perceptions of the humans around them.

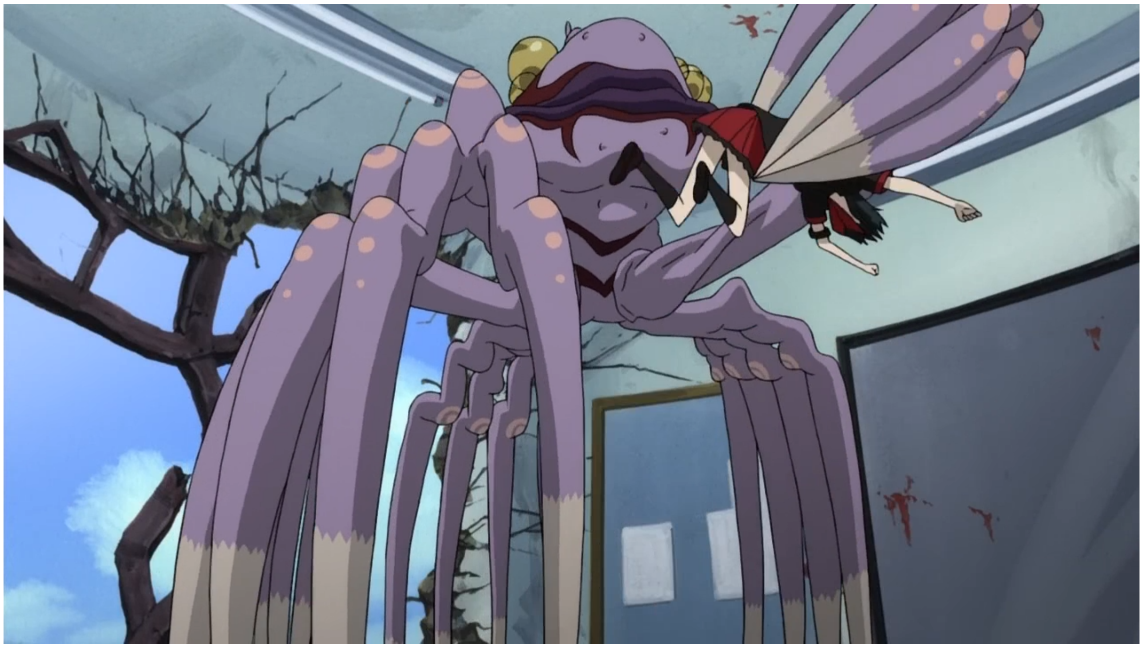
(I would caution against interpreting Miranda in 1 Over X as a literal demon, though it does fit nicely with the katabasis motif of the chapter titles when Lim and friends leave and return to the school.)

The tennis chapter was heavily inspired by the 1973 anime Aim for the Ace! Lurina got me and Remy to watch the first episode of it, claiming it was essential watching to understand Hideaki Anno's Gunbuster, but Remy and I liked it so much we insisted on watching more despite Lurina's protests. I had already decided on tennis as Corbett's sport in previous drafts, but Aim for the Ace! guided the structure of the tournament and the aesthetic of the endless mannequins who populate the background of The Breakers. For a time, Lurina attempted to design a cover for 1 Over X using an image from Aim for the Ace!, but I ultimately decided against using it:

The strange plants that start to appear in the garden near the end of this part were taken from À Rebours, another novel by Joris-Karl Huysmans. In it, the main character retreats fully from society, focusing instead on sensual pleasures that titillate his preference for the decaying, decrepit, and fake. As part of this mission, he cultivates several bizarre plants, including those I eventually put into 1 Over X. Miranda's name being similar to *Nepenthes mirabilis* is a coincidence I ran with, as was her name originating from The Tempest. When I came up with the character in 2020, I took the name from a character in Fire Emblem: Thracia 776.

The last few sentences of the arc, in which Lim reads her story to the class, leaving it ambiguous whether what follows is part of her story, was inspired by the 2018 Korean film Burning, which has a similar conceit to its ending.

XIV. Part III Part II



The final part was by far the most difficult to write, and it initially came out awful. Six of its seven chapters would receive substantial revisions and rewrites during the editing phase, and the only one that wasn't revised was the first (Chapter 22), when Weaver and her friends go out for a smoke.

Chapter 23, by contrast, was a brick wall. Ironically, the basic conceit of the chapter existed in my mind since Draft 4 in 2020: the school authorities attempt to wrangle control of the school when it's still unclear what's happening, only to be killed as monsters overrun the office. For some reason, though, I floundered when I actually had to write it.

Wintermute's Alternate was the main issue. Unlike Ryan, whose Alternate was modeled on Huysmans, she lacked a clear concept. (The scene in Chapter 13 where she appears in the dark tunnel under The Breakers did not exist until the editing phase.) In my plans, the doppelgangers were supposed to be "extreme" versions of the characters they replaced, distorted by the internet. What did a distorted version of Wintermute look like? What made her murderous, while Ryan wanted to fit in? I fumbled my way through the scene, hitting the plot beats but failing to make them land. In the middle of writing the chapter, I was obliged to travel out of state for a few days. When I returned, I had the concept of Wintermute's Alternate talking like ChatGPT (I already placed the hints that Wintermute was a robot earlier in the story), but while this was *a* concept it didn't resolve the other issues. Days passed and I became increasingly frustrated. Eventually there was nothing to do but drop my tried and true phrase, "I'll fix it in post," and move on.

I started saying "I'll fix it in post" a lot during the remaining chapters.

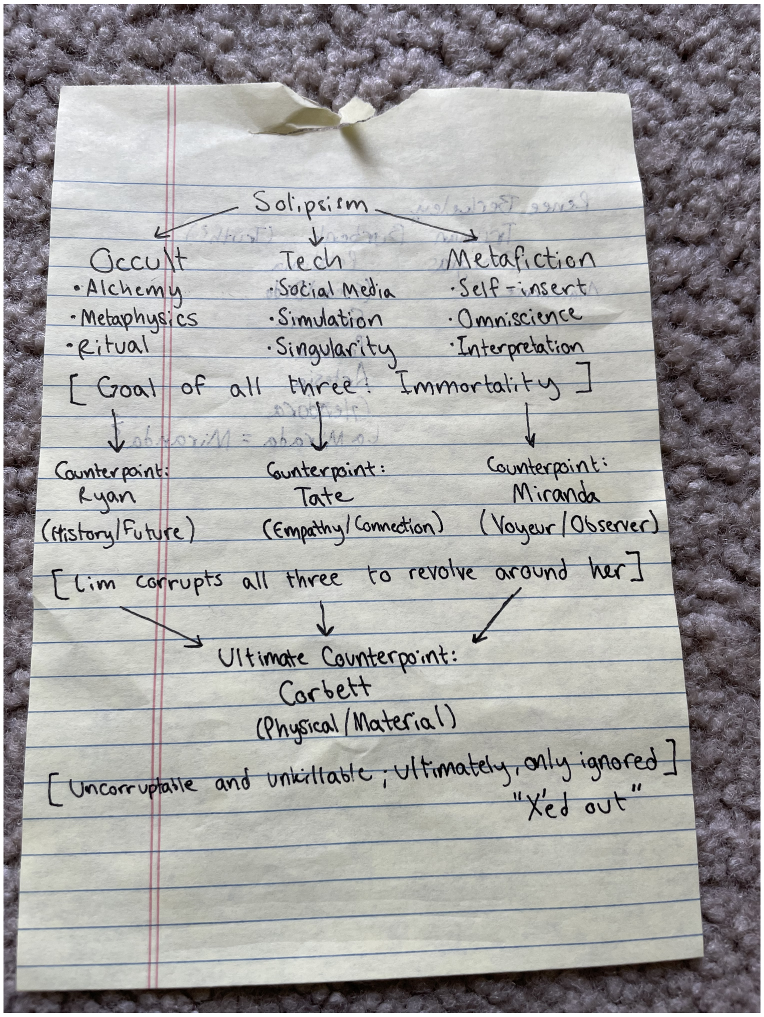
Chapter 24, which I envisioned as the "Blood-C chapter," frustrated me because I felt like I wasn't hitting the brutal highs of Blood-C. Chapter 25, in which Miranda explains the story MatPat-style, was a great idea I got shortly after introducing Miranda, but her theories themselves came out ramshackle. One of my concepts for the story ever since I added the information-derangement angle was for it to feel like several different horror storylines occurring at once: one with doppelgangers, one with the Gorehound, one with occult rituals, and so on. Miranda's theories would disentangle these storylines and present each as a distinct theory, while mostly failing to account for whichever storyline her theory wasn't currently about. In actual practice, though, these storylines were knotted together too tightly, and the theories lacked the punchy clarity I strove for.

I was getting tired. I had been writing this story for seven months. I had been writing it for seven years. The finish line was in sight, and I just wanted to be done. Chapter 26 lacked impact. I'll fix it in post. Ryan's speech at the table in Chapter 27 was middling. I'll fix it in post. The final chapter, 28, was strangely organized; Lim kills Wintermute long before Corbett closes the hole, so while one half of the climax concludes, the other continues. Oh well, I thought finally, I'll fix it in post.

What mattered on August 2, 2025, when I wrote the words The End, was that I had written it. Before, I abandoned draft after draft, attempt after attempt. Multiple times I considered the concept dead and buried. Now I had a finished draft.

The hardest part was done. Or so I thought.

XV. I Fix It in Post



Solipsism

Occult	Tech	Metafiction
•Alchemy	·Social Media	·Self-insert
•Metaphysics	·Simulation	·Omniscience
•Ritual	·Singularity	·Interpretation

[Goal of all three: Immortality]

Counterpoint:	Counterpoint:	Counterpoint:
Ryan	Tate	Miranda
(History/Future)	(Empathy/Connection)	(Voyeur/Observer)

[Lim corrupts all three to revolve around her]

Ultimate Counterpoint:
Corbett
(Physical/Material)

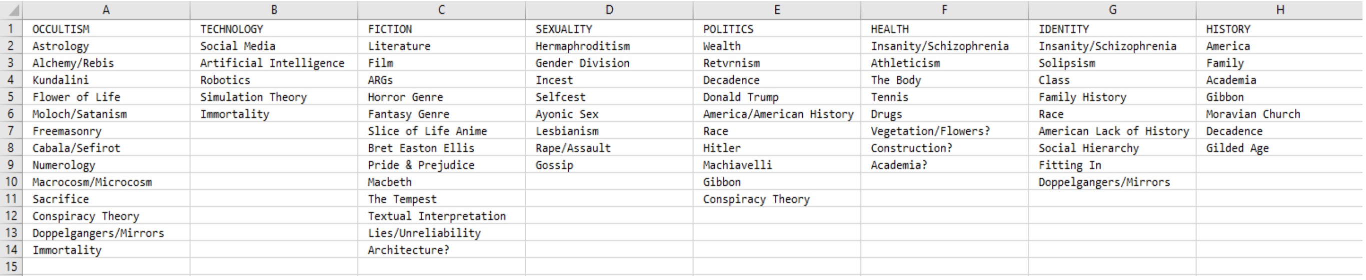
[Uncorruptable and unkillable; ultimately, only ignored]
"X'ed out"

I finished the draft at the beginning of August. I gave myself until Halloween to edit it, a generous three months. It only took two months to fix When I Win in post, and that was a story that also necessitated rewriting several chapters, so I thought I was being conservative. Instead, I wound up working full tilt until a couple of days before release.

My first editing pass focused exclusively on improving the prose, which led to cutting about 7,000 words (on top of the 6,000 I cut between Draft 6 and 7). Unusually for me, all subsequent editing passes would add words, until the published version of the story was actually longer than the draft.

The difficulty, I realized during my first readthrough, centered on the same issue that made Chapter 25 (Miranda's theories) so challenging. I mentioned that I wrote Chapter 2, the Twitter chapter, with the mentally of "throwing spaghetti at the wall." To an extent, that mentality pervaded the entire story. Following my goal of presenting a complex mishmash of information that seemed like multiple different horror stories tangled together, I wound up including tons of moments that were inexplicably random when viewed in the context of the entire story. What, exactly, *was* the narrative underlying all the noise...? To an extent, I wanted that question to remain enigmatic. But the question would only be compelling, would only drive people to try and answer it, if there was an underlying sense of logic that guided events, if everything could at least be sorted into similarly-marked bins, if not assembled into a perfect structure.

As I wrote the final few chapters, I read Foucault's Pendulum by Umberto Eco, another story about attempting to construct meaning out of endless snatches of occultism and conspiracy theory. This novel would have a significant influence on how I constructed meaning out of my own story, which I was in some ways doing retroactively after I wrote it. I created a spreadsheet that listed every theme or motif present in 1 Over X, organized by type:



	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1	OCCULTISM	TECHNOLOGY	FICTION	SEXUALITY	POLITICS	HEALTH	IDENTITY	HISTORY
2	Astrology	Social Media	Literature	Hermaphroditism	Wealth	Insanity/Schizophrenia	Insanity/Schizophrenia	America
3	Alchemy/Rebis	Artificial Intelligence	Film	Gender Division	Retvrnism	Athleticism	Solipsism	Family
4	Kundalini	Robotics	ARGs	Incest	Decadence	The Body	Class	Academia
5	Flower of Life	Simulation Theory	Horror Genre	Selfcest	Donald Trump	Tennis	Family History	Gibbon
6	Moloch/Satanism	Immortality	Fantasy Genre	Ayonic Sex	America/American History	Drugs	Race	Moravian Church
7	Freemasonry		Slice of Life Anime	Lesbianism	Race	Vegetation/Flowers?	American Lack of History	Decadence
8	Cabala/Sefirot		Bret Easton Ellis	Rape/Assault	Hitler	Construction?	Social Hierarchy	Gilded Age
9	Numerology		Pride & Prejudice	Gossip	Machiavelli	Academia?	Fitting In	
10	Macrocosm/Microcosm		Macbeth		Gibbon		Doppelgangers/Mirrors	
11	Sacrifice		The Tempest		Conspiracy Theory			
12	Conspiracy Theory		Textual Interpretation					
13	Doppelgangers/Mirrors		Lies/Unreliability					
14	Immortality		Architecture?					
15								

Thinking about it this way, it became easier for me to draw connections between the various random elements in the story. Notably, three of these "bins" corresponded to Miranda's three theories: occultism, technology, and fiction. The most important bin, though, seemed to be identity, which also encompassed the bins of sexuality, politics, and health. I decided the most important motif, the one that defined not only the formal style of the work but also its ending, was solipsism.

Solipsism itself was a topic of interest to me due to the essays I wrote earlier that year on internet fiction like Sword Art Online and Solo Leveling, and that interest bled into my other thoughts about the internet's propensity toward incomprehensibly limitless amounts of information. It made sense as the core concept at the center of 1 Over X, so I guided my editing efforts toward making that more apparent.

I found in Miranda's theories of the occult, technology, and metafiction a bent toward solipsistic godhead, either in the form of the philosopher's stone, the singularity, or the omniscience of the author-god. Each theory had a major character that represented it, too: Ryan with her rituals, Tate and the implication she was a robot (which was, at that time, a throwaway oddity I added on a whim), and Miranda's seeming externality to the story. It was Miranda and the metafiction angle that existed most obviously in the draft, so during editing I would significantly alter the Ryan/occult and Tate/technological aspects to mirror Miranda.

Specifically, something I noticed about Miranda's theories was that they became increasingly centered around Enid Lim. In the occult theory, Lim doesn't factor at all; everything is being done by nefarious elites, and Lim is at best only a victim. In the technological theory, Lim is the "ultimate AI," but her training is dependent on Luc and Tate Wintermute. Lastly, in the metafiction theory, Lim is the omniscient arbiter of the world, dependent on nothing and nobody. It was as though Lim slowly corrupted Miranda—a representation of the story's external audience—to seeing the world as centering around Lim.

This realization clicked everything else into place. I had struggled with the exact nature of the Alternates, viewing them only as generically more extreme versions of their originals. Now, I realized they should be corruptions that were changed to become focused solely on Enid Lim.

I went through the entire story, tweaking Ryan's Alternate's dialogue so she viewed Lim as God and rewriting her speech at the table in Chapter 27. Likewise, I rewrote most of Chapter 23 and 26 so Tate's Alternate was slavishly devoted to Lim (like an overly-accommodating LLM) and added the scene with her in the tunnel to Chapter 13. The change to Tate's Alternate also added a logical reason why she kills Dr. Avenarius, because she believes she is helping Lim hide her insanity.

After this, the hidden plot underlying the story became clear to me. Ryan didn't become an Alternate by random chance; it was done by Lim's Alternate, who—as a version of Lim utterly devoted to herself—sought to fulfill Lim's wishes by making the world revolve around her. I added a moment where Lim sees her Alternate next to Ryan the last time Ryan is seen alive to make the order of events clear, and also changed the scene in the sacrificial chamber. Originally, Eric was attacked by a generic shadowy figure, another piece of spaghetti on the wall. Now, Lim's Alternate attacked him. It was perfect. It even fit with Miranda's theories, as Lim's Alternate is the only element of the story Miranda doesn't seem to know about, a lack of awareness I emphasized by having her dramatically name Luc Wintermute as the first Alternate instead. These ideas also enabled me to organize the work into its alchemically-titled four parts, charting Lim's development to the godhead of alchemical perfection.

I made other, less intensive changes. Originally, in Chapter 27, Corbett and her goon squad are attacked by an unknown Entity in a school building, which takes Joan St. Cuthbert; I changed this scene to instead use the plants creeping into the school. I added the subplot about Halicarnassus Brown's dog, Apollo, and his castrated statue, to more plausibly explain the Gorehound as a human-canine alchemical hybrid. (Lurina helped come up with the dog statue, though her idea was that the statue was removed because "the students kept putting funny hats on it"—I was the one who came up with the realistic dog penis.) Extrapolating off the scene in Chapter 23 where Miss Syrene tries to open the front gate with an oddly archaic key—another random detail I added on a whim—I created an overarching key motif/subplot, which included the addition of Tate Wintermute's locket, Miranda's Hellraiser-esque puzzle box, and the lock on the closet door that Lim ultimately uses to seal herself away. On top of general improvements to the most dramatic moments to make them more visceral and shocking, I felt by my third editing pass, less than a month from the slated Halloween release, that I had polished the work into a cohesive shape.

I expected I was done. I sent the work off to some friends for feedback and started planning promotional material for the story. I had an idea to do a little ARG, which would start with an essay I would post to my Tumblr analyzing Smile 2 (which I watched for the first time with Remy and Lurina during 1 Over X's editing phase). In the essay, I would link to a different essay, on another account, supposedly by Noël D'Addario and analyzing Gorehound III. D'Addario's essay would then link to a YouTube video by Miranda Van Zandt, analyzing my story 1 Over X. I planned for the video to be narrated by my ex-girlfriend.

Then the feedback came in.

Other than Remy and Lurina, to whom I had extensively discussed my vision for the story, and Avunvain (author of Questing Beast), who is often a more challenging stylist than even I am, the unanimous response went like this:

I don't get it.

Nobody understood the story. They were befuddled by everything, especially the ending I had just added, where Wintermute describes being attacked by her father. One reader said, "I feel like a dog watching two people have sex." Another reader said they gave themselves a migraine trying to understand what the story was about, even after I gave them hints. All in all, four different readers failed to get it.

By this point, I was low on energy. The effort of writing and rewriting had taken a lot out of me, and once you start looking ahead, thinking you're done, it's miserable to try and go back. But I had to go back. I scrapped my ARG idea, electing to focus on improving the work itself. I needed to make the story clearer. Surely it would only take one more piece, one more element that signposted where to look.

After scouring my mind, after discussing it with Remy and Lurina, I came up with that piece. It was Prue Malheur.

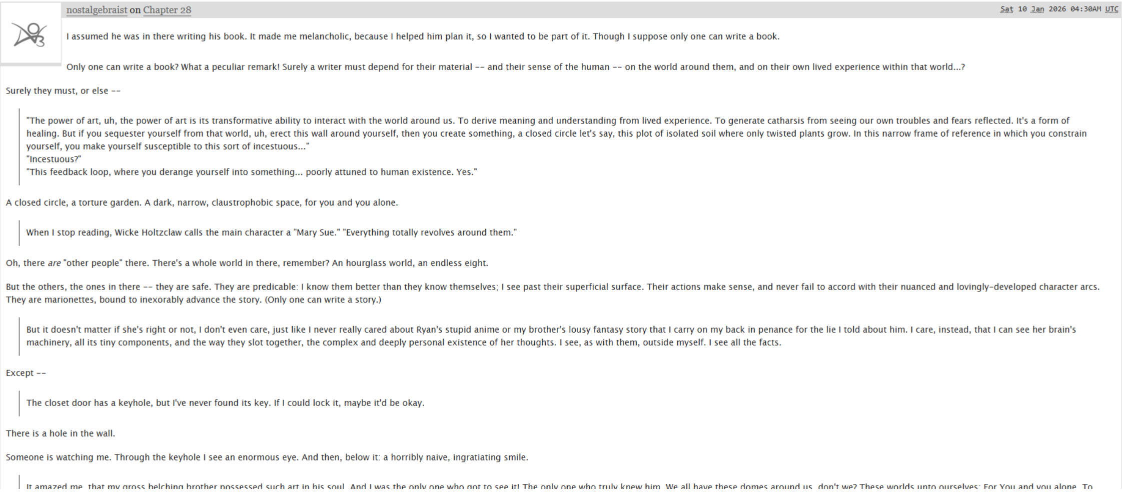
Prue Malheur was in the story since the original draft, though in a more minor role than I originally envisioned. I wanted her to be, like Miranda, a weird character who pops into existence in the back half of the story. But after her introduction at the tennis tournament, I failed to integrate her elsewhere. If there was something I hadn't yet tapped to its fullest potential, it was her.

First, I wrote the scene in Chapter 21 where Lim speaks to Malheur in the dining hall. Not only did Malheur emphasize a different way of thinking about the story, a way that put her in direct opposition to Miranda (paying off a comparison I already seeded simply by introducing Malheur and Miranda in similar ways), but I also added the plotline about Lim's father and Luc Wintermute. I did this primarily because some of my confused readers felt it was random that Luc Wintermute had such a significant role in the final chapter, so I wanted to increase his presence in the story.

Then, I significantly expanded Malheur's role at the table in Chapter 27. She was there before, though without really doing anything. Now, her twofold appearance there gave her a reason to discuss ways to escape Lim's solipsistic orbit. I also added a speech Lim gives, in which she has a moment of clarity and understands that she has wanted everything to be about her all along. Remy suggested I add it, comparing it to a speech near the end of American Psycho where Bateman explains his own failings as a clear thesis to the audience.

Then it was done. I didn't have time to make more changes; Halloween was days away. I had to hope my final round of edits fixed the issues.

XVI. The Readers



nostalgebraist on Chapter 28 Sat 10 Jan 2026 04:30AM UTC

I assumed he was in there writing his book. It made me melancholic, because I helped him plan it, so I wanted to be part of it. Though I suppose only one can write a book.

Only one can write a book? What a peculiar remark! Surely a writer must depend for their material -- and their sense of the human -- on the world around them, and on their own lived experience within that world...?

Surely they must, or else --

> "The power of art, uh, the power of art is its transformative ability to interact with the world around us. To derive meaning and understanding from lived experience. To generate catharsis from seeing our own troubles and fears reflected. It's a form of healing. But if you sequester yourself from that world, uh, erect this wall around yourself, then you create something, a closed circle let's say, this plot of isolated soil where only twisted plants grow. In this narrow frame of reference in which you constrain yourself, you make yourself susceptible to this sort of incestuous..."
> "Incestuous?"
> "This feedback loop, where you derange yourself into something... poorly attuned to human existence. Yes."

A closed circle, a torture garden. A dark, narrow, claustrophobic space, for you and you alone.

> When I stop reading, Wicke Holtzclaw calls the main character a "Mary Sue." "Everything totally revolves around them."

Oh, there *are* "other people" there. There's a whole world in there, remember? An hourglass world, an endless eight.

But the others, the ones in there -- they are safe. They are predicable: I know them better than they know themselves; I see past their superficial surface. Their actions make sense, and never fail to accord with their nuanced and lovingly-developed character arcs. They are marionettes, bound to inexorably advance the story. (Only one can write a story.)

> But it doesn't matter if she's right or not, I don't even care, just like I never really cared about Ryan's stupid anime or my brother's lousy fantasy story that I carry on my back in penance for the lie I told about him. I care, instead, that I can see her brain's machinery, all its tiny components, and the way they slot together, the complex and deeply personal existence of her thoughts. I see, as with them, outside myself. I see all the facts.

Except --

> The closet door has a keyhole, but I've never found its key. If I could lock it, maybe it'd be okay.

There is a hole in the wall.

Someone is watching me. Through the keyhole I see an enormous eye. And then, below it: a horribly naive, ingratiating smile.

> It amazed me, that my gross belching brother possessed such art in his soul. And I was the only one who got to see it! The only one who truly knew him. We all have these domes around us, don't we? These worlds unto ourselves: For You and you alone. To

The readers were better than I ever could have imagined.

When I sent the edited draft to my friends to review, I also sent the copy to Benedict, author of Cordyceps and many other works. Before I met Benedict, before I read any of his work, I knew of him from the comment section to Almost Nowhere by Nostalgebraist. In a work in which the characters themselves read and comment on the work, Benedict's constant longform analyses of every plot development made him seem to become a character itself, part of the work rather than a simple reader. After Benedict read the first three chapters of my draft, giving responses similar to those he left on Almost Nowhere, I stopped him from reading the rest. I decided I would rather he read the story as I released it and leave comments that might spur the other readers to speculation and analysis.

This turned out to be unnecessary. The readers were already willing to turn out en masse. 1 Over X, despite not having an exceptional view count, is by far my story with the most comments. I feel strongly that those comments are integral to the experience of the story, and encourage any new readers to read them as well.

In my essay on Valle Verde, I discuss how the story uses challenging postmodern techniques to conceal its core narrative. Despite the aggressive difficulty of the text, though—and the text of countless ARG/analog horror works like it—legions of fans turn out to disentangle every little detail and construct a coherent story. The obscene success of MatPat alone points to the hunger millions have to make sense of the insensible, to simplify difficult narratives. My hope had been to use that story-solving impulse to force readers to close read my text, not for basic plot details, but to better understand it on a deeper level, to engage with it as literature. I'm more than pleased with the results.

So thank you, readers. Thank you, everyone who left a comment. Thank you also to Remy and Lurina, and the other people I asked to read the story prior to its release: Avunvain, Juli, Pigoseg, 7th, and Somebody's Little Sister.

I hope you all enjoyed.

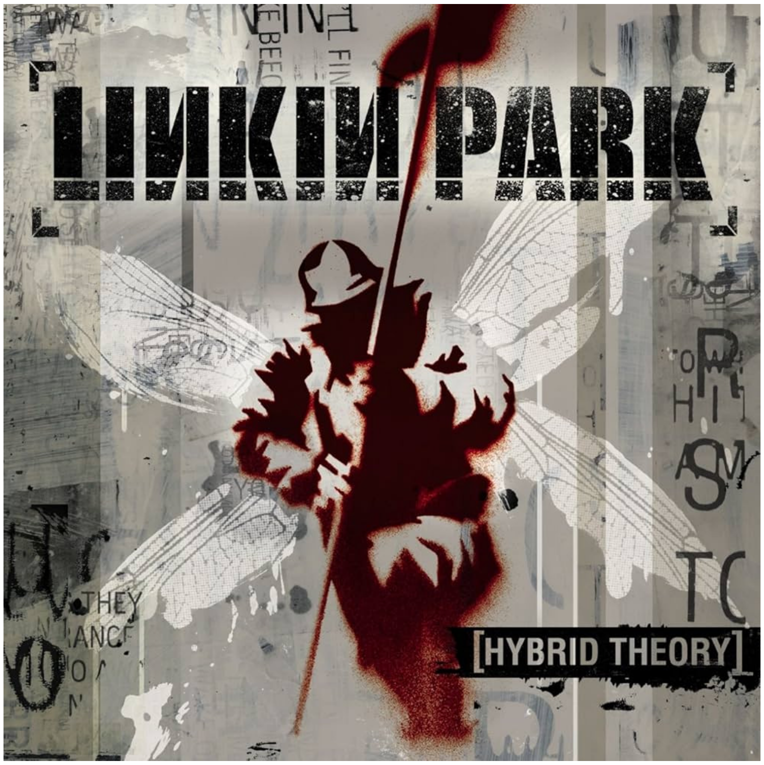
XVII. Names

This story has a ton of named characters, and it has names I created as far back as 2017, leading to possibly the most interesting list of name origins of any of my stories. Here they are:

- Enid Lim: **Enid** from the city in Oklahoma and a character in Berwick Saga. **Lim** from David Lim, a League of Legends esports coach.
- Eric Lim: **Eric** from Erec and Enide, a poem by Chrétien de Troyes.
- Tate Wintermute: **Tate** from a character in Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade (now localized as Thea). **Wintermute** from unknown origin.
- Cherry Corbett: **Cherry** from the main character of an anti-drug PSA storybook the teacher read to me in first grade. **Corbett** from a character in Saw III and a random enemy in Final Fantasy V.
- Siobhan Ryan: **Siobhan** from this video. **Ryan** from no particular origin.
- Prue Malheur: **Prue** from a character in the TV show Charmed. **Malheur** from Malheur County, Oregon.
- Spirit Labuschagne: **Spirit** from no particular origin. **Labuschagne** from Marnus Labuschagne, an Australian cricket player.
- Nadine Block: The oldest name in the story; it was the name of a character in Useless. **Nadine** from a student at my elementary school. **Block** from a character in The Trial by Franz Kafka.
- Zinnia Fitzpeter: **Zinnia** from Panuwat "Zinnia" Chaianan, an obscure Thai League of Legends esports player. **Fitzpeter** from no particular origin.
- MacKenzie Fayerweather: **MacKenzie** from no particular origin. **Fayerweather** from a list of early settlers in Massachusetts.
- Lulu Paraiso: Name suggested by Avunvain.
- Amy Weaver: **Amy** from a character in Sonic the Hedgehog. **Weaver** from a user on Nintendo's official Nsider forum in 2006-7.
- Miranda Van Zandt: **Miranda** from a character in Thracia 776. **Van Zandt** from Van Zandt County, Texas.
- Noël D'Addario: **Noël** from a user on a Madoka Magica Discord server. **D'Addario** from Noah "Decoy" D'Addario, an obscure Canadian League of Legends esports player.
- Firenze George: **Firenze** from the Italian name for the city of Florence. **George** from Regina George, a character in Mean Girls.
- Tam Bell: Decline to state.
- Velouria Roseingrave: **Velouria** from Velouria "Viki" Baty, an obscure French League of Legends esports player. **Roseingrave** from a list of British politicians.
- Tianne Devers: **Tianne** from Tian, the Chinese word for heaven. **Devers** from no particular origin.
- Christine Rosenkreuz: From Christian Rosenkreuz, mythical founder of the occult Rosicrucian order.
- Myrtle Lovejoy: From no particular origin.
- Meredith Johannes: **Meredith** from no particular origin. **Johannes** from Johannes Trithemius, German occultist.
- Stella Morgen: From Stella Matutina (Morning Star), an occult order.
- Phebe Stuyvesant: **Phebe** from Cornelius Vanderbilt's mother, Phebe Hand. **Stuyvesant** from Stuyvesant Fish, a member of New York high society during the Gilded Age.
- Joan St. Cuthbert: **Joan** from Joan of Arc. **Cuthbert** from William Cuthbert Faulkner.

- Mel[pomene] Goldthwaite: **Melpomene** from one of the nine Muses—note that Lim only assumes her name is Melpomene—specifically the one that is most prominent in the video game Disillusion ST. **Goldthwaite** from a list of early settlers in Massachusetts.
- Lethe Marie Claypoole: **Lethe** from the mythical river. **Marie** from no particular origin. **Claypoole** from Alice Claypoole, wife of Cornelius Vanderbilt II.
- Simone de Vril: **Simone** from the film S1M0NE starring Al Pacino. **Vril** from the occult novel of the same name by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, now more famous for his bad opening sentences.
- Agatha Speer/Speare: **Agatha** from Agartha, a legendary subterranean kingdom. **Speer** from Albert Speer, Nazi architect. **Speare** from William Shakespeare.
- Wicke Holtzclaw: **Wicke** from a character in the video game Eternal Return. **Holtzclaw** from John "John" Holtzclaw, an obscure American League of Legends esports player.
- Valerie Soranus: From Quintus Valerius Soranus, a Roman poet whose only surviving couplet describes the god Jupiter as hermaphroditic.
- Liz Bennet: From Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of Pride & Prejudice.
- Lolita "Lol" Lorillard: **Lolita** from the novel of the same name by Vladimir Nabokov. **Lorillard** from the Lorillard family, a New York old money family known for founding one of America's oldest tobacco companies.
- Ursula Yocum: **Ursula** from a character in Fire Emblem 7. **Yocum** from a student at my high school.
- Ana[psychia] Gray: **Anapsychia** from a Roman letter writer. **Gray** from no particular origin.
- Azusa Kennedy: **Azusa** from the city in California and Azusa Nakano, a character in K-On! **Kennedy** from John F. Kennedy.
- Patricia St. Martin: From Patricia Martin, a character in Lucky☆Star.
- Clio Fish: **Clio** from one of the nine Muses. **Fish** from Stuyvesant Fish, a member of New York high society during the Gilded Age.
- Freyja Mason: From Freemason.
- Bridget and Klein Schermerhorn: **Bridget** from a character in Guilty Gear. **Klein** from a character in Fire Emblem: The Binding Blade. **Schermerhorn** from a prominent old money New York family.
- Zuleika Frelinghuysen: **Zuleika** from Zuleika Dobson, a novel by Max Beerbohm. **Frelinghuysen** from a prominent old money New York family.
- Julia Evola: From Julius Evola, an Italian fascist occultist.
- Miss Syrene: From a character in Fire Emblem: The Sacred Stones.
- Dr. Avenarius: From Richard Avenarius, a Swiss philosopher.
- Sirisha V. Sharma: **Sirisha** from someone I know. **Sharma** from a list of common Brahmin surnames.
- Machiavelli: From a student at my elementary school. Their first name. (Their parents, apparently, were nightmares.)

Chapter 24: Hybrid Theory (album)



In 2017, Linkin Park frontman Chester Bennington killed himself. Instantly, unfairly, the meaning of his music changed.

Because, let's face it, by 2017 Linkin Park was pretty lame. It had been for years, even if momentum and attempts at musical reinvention kept its members from going hungry. Like Evanescence's Bring Me to Life (Wake me up inside CAN'T WAKE UP), many of Linkin Park's songs had become the punchline to jokes about edgy, empty teenage angst. Perhaps no example is more iconic than the chorus to Crawling, the fifth track on the band's 2000 debut album Hybrid Theory:

> CRAAAAAAWLING in my skin
>
> These wounds, they will not heal

And in many regards, the reputation was not undeserved. Linkin Park, in fact the entire "nu metal" genre it was the foremost example of, was not only dated (spiky hair, white guys rapping), it had always sort of been an industry plant.

Everything was an industry plant in the late 90s and early 00s, the high water mark of big studio monopolization on mainstream culture prior to the shakeup caused by mass adoption of the internet. Labels controlled both the radio stations and the falsely countercultural (actually Warner-owned) MTV; if you were an indie or underground musician, you were consigned to local bar gigs and hawking burned CDs on street corners. In some ways, Linkin Park is as much a rags-to-riches story as you can get within this framework (the core of the band were high school friends who only got a shot after one of them interned for an established music producer at UCLA, and even then they were turned down by label after label), but they also *sound* more "industry" than many similar nu metal bands. Hybrid Theory is a remarkably "clean" album. Clean not only in its professional production and clearly-enunciated and comprehensible lyrics, but also in the sense that across its 38-minute runtime there is never uttered a single swear word, not even one as mild as "damn" or "hell."

That cleanness contrasts sharply with the aggressive tone of the music, which contributes to the feel that the music is "fake." Of course, even Linkin Park's cruder contemporaries were being rigorously focus-tested and psyopped on MTV via fake "people's choice" votes, but the cleanness may explain why Linkin Park reached higher highs than the rest of the nu metal scene and why they still get played today. It's metal, rap, rock filtered by "pop," as in popular.

The implication of being an industry plant is that you're not real. Everything you say was designed in a lab, your emotions are not your own. Hence why Linkin Park's angsty choruses became a joke; hence why Chester Bennington's suicide "changed" the music's meaning.

Because now, he was real. When he sang "Crawling in my skin," that was a legitimate expression of actual mental turmoil, not some industry attempt to cash in on youth counterculture.

One day after Bennington's death, The Guardian eulogized him by saying:

> Metal's standard vocal style is to express anger and disaffection through a deliberately obscure roar, mangling diction as a way of setting yourself apart from conventional society. Bennington's decision to sing clearly and openly was, therefore, more radical than he is given credit for, and indeed more socially valuable.

The decision to sing clearly and openly was, of course, motivated by the studio's desire for the band to be more pop-friendly, and clear vocals make for a catchier song. (Eminem's mainstream popularity in the rap scene around the same time is almost certainly a byproduct of his clear, white American enunciation compared to most of his contemporaries.) After all, Bennington was only brought onto the band at the behest of executive producer Jeff Blue, even against the wishes of the band itself, who worried a guy named "Chester Bennington" might be too uncool for them.

In fact, it's unclear how much "Bennington's decision to sing clearly and openly" was Bennington's decision; even ignoring studio meddling (of which there was much), the band's main creative driver and lyricist was not Bennington but Mike Shinoda, the secondary vocalist/rapper.

Guy on right (Mike Shinoda) thought guy on left (Chester Bennington) might not be cool enough.

Shinoda's credits on Hybrid Theory are extensive; he is listed as contributing rap vocals, programming, samples, piano, Pro Tools assistance, drawing the album art, and other line art and sketches. Bennington, meanwhile, is credited only for vocals. Shinoda led the band before Bennington was even part of it, and has continued to lead it after Bennington's death. If it is possible to ascribe Linkin Park's creative vision to any one person, it would be him.

The point is that the creative vision, the authorial intent, does not matter that much; it is already entangled inextricably with studio mandates and behind-the-scenes collaboration anyway. It doesn't matter if Shinoda or some industry ghost was the one who wrote the line "One step closer to the edge, and I'm about to BREAK." In singing it, Chester Bennington becomes part of the line's performance; and his death thus cannot help from being part of its context, regardless of anyone's intent on the matter.

Is this unfair? Yes.

But at the same time, the way people have understood Linkin Park's music, or any music, or anything, has always been unfair, always been marked by cultural forces outside the creator's control. The interpretation of Linkin Park as a hollow, empty industry plant is itself unfair, reliant on assumptions about what went down behind closed doors, what was done as studio mandate and what was done at the band's liberty. Bennington left no note before killing himself; his motives remain a mystery, beyond the fact that he struggled with mental health and substance abuse issues his entire life. Seventeen years is a long time between Hybrid Theory and his death. What connection, if any, there might actually be between them is impossible to gauge. Yet now, to accuse Bennington's screamed, emotional lyrics of being inauthentic, empty, and melodramatic, the way they were accused innumerable times before, would seem to fly in the face of the evidence.

Here's another question: If Chester Bennington's anguished vocals are no longer "fake," is Mike Shinoda and his rapping still fake? Would Shinoda need to kill himself too to be taken seriously? Would he be taken seriously if he did?

Hello Chester. I want to play a game.

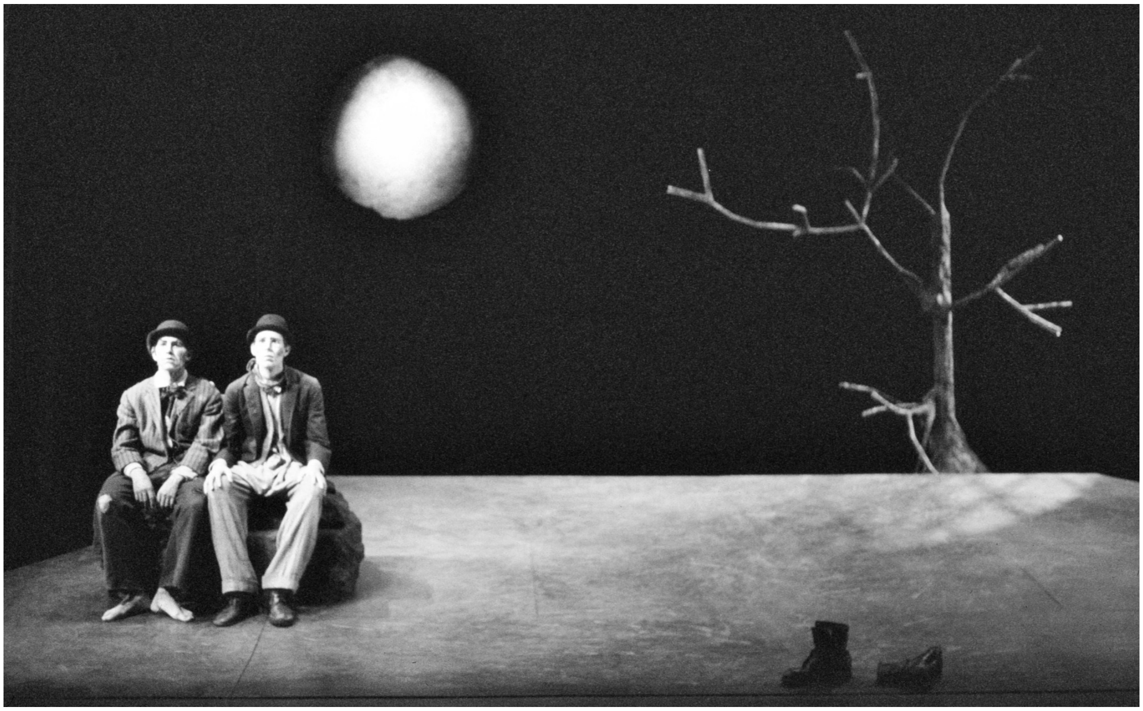
And, perhaps most important of all: Why does art need to be "real" at all?

Hybrid Theory, which is identical in 2026 to the Hybrid Theory of 2000, is--if taken seriously--a bizarre, absurdist album. I mean absurdist in the sense of absurdist theater, Waiting for Godot or Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead; like those stripped down, minimalist plays, Hybrid Theory has an almost negligible dramatis personae. Across 12 tracks and 38 minutes, these are the *only* people who are mentioned or even alluded to in the album's lyrics:

- Me
- You
- Mr. Hahn

There are no parents, brothers, sisters, lovers, friends, family. There are no teachers, policemen, or authority figures of any sort (despite the track titled "Points of Authority"). There are no guys down the street or women in the window. There are not even any metaphorical people, or people evoked for rhetorical effect, other than Mike Shinoda (but not Chester Bennington) occasionally using a general, vague "they" or "everybody" in reference to a universal other. Hybrid Theory is a ghost town, a desolate landscape, and it is in this unpopulated terrain the primary conflict of its narrative plays out: the one-sided war between Me and You.

Me is our main character, represented by the speaker. There are, technically, two Mes, corresponding to Linkin Park's two vocalists, Bennington and Shinoda, who both refer to themselves in first person. It is unclear, however, whether Bennington and Shinoda actually represent two different points of view or are merely two different styles depicting the same perspective; their voices often blend together or echo one another, while there is little difference in the subject matter they cover. They are, at best, akin to Godot's Vladimir and Estragon, two characters who have a certain superficial distinction (one the Laurel to the other's Hardy) despite every other aspect of their personality being indistinguishable.



Similarly, there could potentially be multiple Yous, perhaps a different You per song, but even this is difficult to judge. The ubiquitous You who seems to be the root of all Me's troubles has surprisingly consistent character traits: Overbearing, demanding, sadistically pleased by the torture they inflict on Me, disappointed by Me's constant failures. Even as a kid, listening to Linkin Park's hits on the radio, I was intrigued by the nebulous identity of the "You" that constantly appears. They are difficult to pin down as the speaker's lover, parent, friend, or mentor, chimerically embodying aspects from all four simultaneously. Notably, "You" is not the 2nd-person listener; one of the few things made clear is that Me has a close personal relationship with them.

The cynical read is that this vagueness increases pop appeal. Venting specific complaints might play well in a niche that has those exact complaints; a general anger at a "You" who can be anyone plays well with everyone.

Person
YOU
HATE

Seen with "love," though--or seen while assuming the art is "real" and not "fake"--the story changes. Hybrid Theory is an album of isolation as much as it is about anger and angst; for as much as Me hates You, they are tied together, incapable of separating. The third track, With You, makes the point clear:

The sound of your voice, painted on my memories

Even if you're not with me

I'm with you (*You, now I see, keepin' everything inside*)

With you (*You, now I see, even when I close my eyes*)

Meanwhile, the seventh track, titled By Myself in direct response to With You, makes the argument that Me cannot possibly exist alone:

I just end up gettin' hurt again

By myself (*Myself*)

I ask why, *but in my mind I find*

I can't rely on myself (*Myself*)

These ideas are repeated again and again throughout an album that seems to have only one tone and two characters, where the same words and phrases keep recurring. For instance, "Keepin' everything inside" from With You's chorus reappears in the chorus of In the End (Track 8), when Mike Shinoda raps:

I kept everything inside

And even though I tried, it all fell apart

Meanwhile, what's "inside" is made clear in the album's opening track, Papercut.

I know just what it feels like

To have a voice in the back of my head

Like a face that I hold inside

A face that awakes when I close my eyes

A face that watches every time I lie

A face that laughs every time I fall (And watches everything)

As the first song on the album, Papercut sets the tone for the album as a whole. In terms of the album's sound, it does so effectively, featuring the same quick, aggressive instrumentation that can be found on every other track (save one). Lyrically, however, it's an odd opener. Its subject matter deals with paranoia rather than angst or anger, and the "You" that is ubiquitous almost everywhere else is relegated to a minor and uncharacteristically sympathetic role, when Mike Shinoda states "You've got a face on the inside too / Your paranoia's probably worse."

Papercut is one of three songs on the album (not counting the short nonlyrical interlude track) that lack a confrontation with "You." One of the others is Crawling, the much-mocked anthem for self-loathing with a chorus that evokes self harm. Papercut and Crawling contain another repeated motif, notable because it appears in the chorus in both songs (on top of both songs being singles that received major airtime at the same time). In Papercut:

> It's like I can't stop what I'm hearing within
>
> It's like the face inside is right beneath my skin

Which in Crawling famously reappears as CRAAAAAAWLING in my skin.

As with everything else, the cynic might chalk these repeated ideas up to a lyrical lack of creativity, the ad nauseum repetition of stock imagery intended to press the right angst buttons. Yet the effect of the repetition, when considered seriously, creates an alternative narrative for the entire album, one that reframes the nebulous "You" into an identifiable culprit.

You *is* Me.

Papercut posits a "face inside," a voice in the back of the head, one that "laughs every time I fall," one that "points out all my mistakes to me." This behavior is identical to that of "You" in other songs, that mocking, sadistic You that Me is at constant war with. From In the End:

> In spite of the way you were mockin' me
>
> Actin' like I was part of your property

Meanwhile, in Crawling, where the "something inside me" returns, it is described as both "consuming" and "controlling," which likewise correlates to the language of ownership and domination that appears in In the End and elsewhere. From Points of Authority:

> You love the way I look at you
>
> While taking pleasure in the awful things you put me through
>
> You take away if I give in
>
> My life, my pride is broken

And if it seems odd that "Me" can look at "You," as posited in the first line above, Crawling also provides an explanation:

> Against my will, I stand beside my own reflection (My own reflection)
>
> It's haunting (It's haunting) how I can't seem
>
> To find myself again, my walls are closing in

Nowhere is the connection between "Me" and "You" more clear than in the solutions the speaker posits to free themselves from their situation. In Points of Authority, he says he "hurt myself again, just to get back at you," while in Runaway, the literal idea of running away is directly tied to escaping one's own head with the closing refrain "I wanna run away *and open up my mind*."

Only the album's ending points to any hope. In a world that has claustrophobically constricted to a singular Me-You hybrid (the hybrid in Hybrid Theory), the penultimate track, Scratching the Itch, introduces its sole other character, Mr. Hahn. This is the band's turntablist, Joe Hahn, who gets a short interlude to show off his record scratches. As though this opening of the closed circle has changed everything by injecting some external presence into a suffocating internality, the final track Pushing Me Away states somewhat triumphantly that "this is the last," that Me has finally been pushed away from You. He's free!

I'm being cute with it here, reading a literal narrative into lyrics that are at best metaphorical, creating a structure in an album that is, sonically, a barrage of similar-sounding bangers. The album's vagueness--regardless of whether you ascribe that vagueness to cynical pop styling or earnest artistic intent--lends itself to nearly limitless interpretation. For instance, the album's title, Hybrid Theory, might refer to Linkin Park's signature blend of styles (rap-rock, metal-pop), its blend of vocalists into a single speaker (Bennington-Shinoda), or a blend of Me and You. Rather than every instance of You being a reference to "the voice inside my head," there could be both a literal You who actually abuses the speaker, and a figurative You that the speaker has, after such abuse, internalized.

However, I do think my previous comparison of Hybrid Theory to Waiting for Godot sheds light on the album's popularity. Because while Waiting for Godot is bleakly minimalist in its staging and production, featuring only a lone tree on an empty stage to accompany its tiny number of actors, Hybrid Theory balances its unrelentingly miserable lyrics and the depopulated world they depict with an expansive, maximalist sound. Sporting dual vocalists and a hip-hop mandated turntablist, Linkin Park is a larger-than-average band at six members, and this expansiveness is further complemented by generous sampling and lavish production. The result is an album that, regardless of its lyrical content, hypes instead of depresses. The album's biggest highlight isn't any allusion to self harm, or torture at the hands of a toxic You, but Chester Bennington's sudden screaming in the bridge of One Step Closer:

> SHUT UP WHEN I'M TALKING TO YOU

SHUT UP

SHUT UP

SHUT UPPPPPPPP

I've written many essays about pop cultural artifacts nobody except me would bother to take seriously (i.e., anime). At the advent of mass media, pop culture started to usurp high culture as the dominant form of art; the internet has accelerated this trend. Even the wealthy and powerful of today are more likely to be influenced by One Piece or Fortnite than by whatever won the Pulitzer last year. And as part of this hunger for the ascension of pop culture to art, YouTube's video essayist mill has found the time to wax poetic on any bit of cultural detritus for eight hours or more, to millions of views. Yet I still find that people are bound to the concept of "artistic intent" as the primary driver of how they interface with art. People seem to find the concept appealing because it promises a solvable riddle, an objective answer (what was in the author's mind) that cannot be found definitely but could *theoretically* be found. Which, when applied to pop culture, becomes a question that cannot be disentangled from the obvious answer: "They did it to make money." Creating a self-defeating loop, a shutdown of the brain, a perpetual cynicism even in the theater of the ideal that is art.

All art is fake. If it was real, it wouldn't be art. Maybe you could call it news. But art is by definition artifice, regardless of whether it was made cynically for money or for the most earnest artistic intentions. Most art -- pop or not -- was probably made by some unknowable, fundamentally subjective mixture of both. A Hybrid Theory, perhaps. The image of the artist, their biographical reality, has somehow become as important to how much their illusion can be believed as the illusion they actually create.

Chester Bennington was fake until he killed himself. Dead, he became real. Though he left no note, though his "artistic intent" could not be known, the act of suicide is a tantalizing hint that seems as though it can be interpreted some specific way. But the logic is false; his death does not change what "intention" was locked in his mindbox 17 years prior, nor what creative influence he brought to Hybrid Theory versus that brought by Mike Shinoda or the studio suits. All that remains is the reality of the art, which was as real in 2000 as it is in 2026: an album of 12 songs that sounded the same then as they do now, and will sound the same as long as people keep listening to them.

Chapter 25: Uncut Gems (film)

In 2026, it's impossible to watch an American sporting event without seeing an advertisement for sports betting. That's an understatement, actually. It's impossible to watch a single commercial break during an American sporting event without seeing an advertisement for sports betting, which doesn't even account for the advertisements for sports betting that you'll see during the sporting event itself. It's a mania.

Uncut Gems, then, has become unexpectedly prescient, a reflection of a cultural moment when on release in 2019 it looked more like an isolated character study of a singular lunatic gambler.

Despite that, when rewatching this film a lot of the power I felt from it on initial viewing was gone. It makes sense, given how much the film relies on tension to drive interest, and how much the tension is gone when you know how the movie ends. Watching now, with a cooler head, unsurprised every time Howard Ratner seems just about to get off scot free before he makes another outlandish bet, one question kept entering my mind:

How did Howard get this far?

There's a well-respected film tradition, encapsulated by films like Scarface and Goodfellas, of the rise-and-fall crime narrative. (The history of this genre actually stretches far earlier than those movies -- these sorts of gangster films were popular during the pre-Hays Code 1930s.) In these films, an ambitious hoodlum claws their way to the top of a crime syndicate, then become consumed by vices once they achieve the success they craved, precipitating their tragic end. Though not strictly speaking about a gangster, Uncut Gems shares many similarities with these films, with Howard an unscrupulous liar, cheater, schemer, and smuggler aiming for big money in a terrain of loan sharks and gun-toting thugs, chasing brighter and brighter lights, ultimately undone by an addiction to gambling. Even the dialogue style, naturalistic and foul-mouthed, echoes Scorsese.

But in comparing Uncut Gems to a rise-and-fall narrative, the main difference is immediately clear: There's no rise. Uncut Gems takes place over the course of a week, and Howard is already a walking trainwreck from the moment he steps onto the screen. He's already in debt, already hopelessly addicted to gambling, already a compulsive liar. On the other hand, he already owns a successful diamond store, already has a nice home and a wife and three kids.

Assuming a rise-and-fall narrative only with the "rise" prologue lopped off the runtime, left on the editing floor, it's possible to imagine a younger Howard possessing an earnest, hardworking grindset, someone who only succumbs to gambling after he's made a name for himself. The film, though, provides no hints to this past, and in fact frequently contradicts it. By Howard's own admission, his crowning past glory involves starting a trend of diamond-encrusted Furbies, a self-mythos almost too pathetic to be believed. His wife Dinah, seeking a divorce, never states or suggests that Howard was once a better man. She says that he *is* the most annoying man she's ever met, not that he has *become* the most annoying. All of his family, friends, and employees act as though Howard has been the way he has for some time.

Yet Howard isn't a young guy. He's in his forties, and has ostensibly (if the Furbies are anything to go by) been in this racket for years, if not decades. During the week depicted in Uncut Gems, his fall seems not only inevitable but inevitably rapid, a self-destruction he hurtles toward as quickly as possible, without even an inciting incident. Yet there is an unseen lifetime behind him, a lifetime of at least some amount of stability.

Of course, that's not exactly true, right? He starts the film $100,000 in debt. His gambling has already dug him into a deep hole, and Uncut Gems is only really depicting a coup de grace, a final failure after the creditors are already closing in. That's at least how the film initially presents Howard, since the information about the debt is made clear around the same time Howard makes his first ill-advised bet (pawning Kevin Garnett's championship ring to do so). However, late in the film, new information appears to question this narrative. When Garnett asks Howard how much he spent for the gemstone that forms the linchpin of the plot, Howard replies that it cost him $100,000 -- the exact same sum as his debt. Howard isn't in debt from gambling, but from smuggling the gemstone into the country.

This completely changes the narrative around Howard. Because Howard is no longer a guy who loses money gambling. He is, in fact, a guy who only wins. Every single gamble Howard makes throughout the movie pays off. He bets on Kevin Garnett twice, and wins twice. He bets $100,000 on the gem, and although it doesn't make him the million he anticipated, he still nearly doubles his money on it.

"This is how I win," Howard tells Kevin Garnett when explaining why he gambles, the only moment in the film where Howard justifies his actions. In the moment, during a first viewing, the statement sounds absurd, because Howard has loan sharks literally knocking at his door while he bets their money on an insane parlay. The tension, the sense of impending tragedy, suggests he cannot possibly win, that he is spinning yet another outrageous lie. But when viewed again, in the context of the film's actual result, it *is* how he wins. When Howard is killed, it's not because he lost the bet. It's because he was just too annoying ("You're the most annoying man I've ever met") and pissed off the wrong guy. He dies with a triumphant smile on his face, a perpetual moment of bliss he will never wake up from.

Howard Ratner is a man utterly insulated from his own idiocy. Success just comes to him, in an unseen prologue that might as well not exist; he has always been successful, and always will be. On top of winning all his stupid bets, he is surrounded by people who are committed to letting him get away with it. His pawnbroker shows him leniency when he's late returning for the ring, despite threats to the contrary. Kevin Garnett is aware he's being toyed with by a bunch of stupid schemes, but comes back and buys the gemstone anyway. His wife wants to divorce him but seems to be suckered into perpetually waiting until after some holiday to do so. His mistress breaks up with him but comes crawling back. His employees complain, say they're fed up, announce they're quitting, then unceremoniously and without comment appear at work again the next day. He has a rich father-in-law who helps his scheme at the auction despite it obviously being a terrible idea. Most of all, Howard doesn't even owe money to some detached nobody. His creditor is his brother-in-law, who is willing to harass him, even lock him up in a trunk, but who ultimately treats him with absurd lenience, seemingly caught up in the glory of Howard's final win before things suddenly go south. (He doesn't even appear to have charged Howard interest, which given the film's strong fascination with Jewish stereotypes might be an intentional choice given he's an Armenian and not a Jew.)

Howard got this far because everyone, even luck itself, let him get this far. He doesn't even have colon cancer!

In this interpretation of Howard, I can't help but find a parallel to the gambling obsession that has gripped modern sports culture, that has gripped -- in forms like wild stock betting or maniac loose cannon politicking -- the entire country. It's the Grift Economy now, where even the richest and most successful people seem to be hucksters and scam artists, and who somehow keep winning despite every indication that they shouldn't. America is insulated from its own idiocy much like Howard, with completely unfair geographic and historic advantages that seem insurmountable no matter what inane decisions its people make. And like Howard, it has no reason to be this way. Its success is assured regardless.

Perhaps, like Howard, it is this assurance of success that is the root cause of the addiction. If you always win, then gambling isn't risky, is it? It's just a smart investment. Howard's "this is how I win speech" directly juxtaposes him against Kevin Garnett, who is perpetually at practice or at a game or running out the door to go to a game. Garnett is the hard worker, the true grinder (despite his belief in the magic rock that powers him up). Howard simply says, "I'm not an athlete," and presents his gambling as the only alternative to not being one. It's a ridiculous comparison, but it reveals his mindset. Always being successful, the actual process of success is unimportant. Only by creating a narrative around success can Howard feel himself "win." And the more he wins, the more desperate his attempts to create a narrative around winning. He has to constantly push the envelope. It's not enough that he spent $100,000 to smuggle a gemstone he had never seen before out of Ethiopia, make $165,000 on it, and pay back his no-interest loan while pocketing a hefty sum for himself. He has to be the "man who sold Kevin Garnett the magic rock that made him play better." (His son, watching KG win Game 7, shouts pathetically to his friends, "My dad sold that guy a diamond!") He has to be the man who pulled off the impossible, despite the fact that it wasn't actually that impossible at all.

How does the man who always wins keep winning? He has to make it interesting. He is compelled to make it interesting, no matter how stupid the attempt is. No, it's better if it's stupid. That only makes people doubt you more, and your inevitable win feel more like a win. And the win really is inevitable, right? You have all the advantages. You have money and success. You have friends that treat you with kid gloves, only rolling their eyes at whatever hijinks you get up to, threatening to do something about it but never doing anything. There's no way to lose.

You will win, and keep winning. Until, perhaps, one day you become too annoying for your own good.

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